

The Alternative Solution: Counseling Key Employees to Success

Susan Silvano : CMI

As a manager of people, you are likely to work with a variety of people with different talents, communication styles and problem solving abilities. This diversity is what makes a workplace both unique and functional, but is also what makes your job as a manager so challenging! In an ideal work environment with high production and morale, everyone's potential would be realized as they use their strengths and skills. Again, in our ideal world, interpersonal communications and relations are positive and all employees are valued and effective. However, we live in the real world where this is seldom the case and this is one of the reasons why your role as manager is so important.

Employees who are successful can often learn to be more successful with coaching. However, organizations also have individuals who, for varying reasons, don't seem to "click" or adapt well in their changing assignments, or who lose their way after doing a good job in the past. These individuals will not prosper with short-term interventions, but can improve their behavior and their performance with career and life counseling. The barriers for success for individuals in these categories are traditionally highlighted by borderline or poor opinion surveys (sometimes followed by brief periods of remission and positive performance) and continual negative formal and informal feedback from peers and subordinates to higher management. This results in adverse positioning in staff meetings, negativism and incidents with customers or suppliers. Often, these types of employees have been promoted, but have self-doubts that cause them to manage in an artificial style, thus negating the very skills that allowed them to become successful in the first place.

While this type of individual generally has numerous strengths and positive qualities, other employees may wonder why the person is still with the company or why he or she was promoted. If the situation continues without improvement, other employees will begin to either discuss the perceived inequities "around the water fountain" or, they may suffer in silence.

If one of the key people you supervise is not functioning well in his or her position despite having the strengths and skills needed, action must be taken. So, what do you do?

Curative actions are often typified by infusions of management and employee relations counseling. Sometimes the person is sent off to "charm school," either internally or externally. Yet, despite these investments of time and money, something is often still missing and any positive changes are rarely long lived. Many times the employee is transferred to a function where he or she can do less damage (yet pay is not affected). In these cases, the problem remains unsolved; the solution just out of reach.

Other case scenarios include the employee becoming a "lifer," who is given peripheral projects until retirement. This type of approach, although it appears to be humane, damages self-esteem and productivity is affected or destroyed. The employee wants a

solution (whether admitted or not), but is unable to resolve the difficulty via introspection. Perhaps, intuitively, the individual suspects a career change may be needed, but is ill-equipped to make the decision to make the change or is fearful of the unknown.

There is another solution: an effective counseling program with a focus on assisting organizations to manage highly placed staff who are encountering continuing difficulties in the work place. This intense effort is designed to enable individuals to reshape and to continue positively and productively with their careers.

To illustrate the power and effectiveness of this type of program, read the following cases for some specific applications (all names have been changed to protect the privacy of the client):

Case 1

Joan Stubbs, a V.P. in a mid-sized financial company, was provided with counseling and coaching after a series of incidents culminated with Joan yelling at a supervisee during a staff meeting. Joan had been promoted through the company over an 11 year period, and managed 5 top accounts and 8 supervisees at the time she began the program. Joan's supervisors stated that her work was an asset to the company's bottom line and that it was not in the best interest of the company to let her go.

Joan met weekly with her counselor and progress was followed carefully through various interventions that included: psychological assessment, interest and aptitude testing; assigned reading materials and related homework assignments; topical training and education in-session; biofeedback instruction and monitoring; and a client-kept communication log.

Some sample notes from different benchmarked meetings follow.

Pre-client meeting with counselor

Consultation with supervising executive V.P. and HR V.P. outlining concerns to address with client in program:

- Overbearing supervisory style;
- Anger/conflict management (supervisor believed client to have the potential for physical manifestations); and
- Improving positive communication styles.

Meeting 1

Discussed client's understanding of the program and her expectations of content and results. Additional areas to address were identified: management skills; gender discrimination feelings; and stress management techniques. Client stated that she had believed her job was not on the line when told she was to go to counseling; counselor advised client that her supervisors set objectives for changes in her recent and current behavior in an effort to ensure her management position.

Meeting 5

In reviewing client's communication log, it appears that client has started changing her response patterns, both with subordinates and supervisors, and is obtaining positive

results. In addition, her stress level as indicated by her stress level recordings, is reduced. Client stated that new response patterns seem to be coming more naturally to her now; she attempts to step back from a potentially stressful interaction or conflict and obtain all the facts first.

Meeting 15

Client's supervisor called for consultation and reported that 2 more complaints had been filed on client regarding client's communication with subordinates in the past week. Counselor processed these complaints with client and developed more appropriate responses for future situations. Client disclosed recent marital difficulties, and client and counselor discussed this impact on her work. Counselor provided referrals for marriage counselors and recommended client attend marriage counseling.

Meeting 30

Client's supervisor called for consultation and reported that there have been no new complaints. Client continues to journal and work on positive communication styles, and reports low-moderate levels of stress. Client stated that organizational changes in upper management continue to be problematic for her, but that she is no longer reacting with hostility to task and function modifications.

Meeting 45

Client is maintaining professional and productive behavior at work. Client's supervisors reported that there have been no complaints since week 15, and that client is increasing her interaction with supervisees to a positive and productive level. Client stated that she no longer feels the need to keep her communication journal on a daily basis, and is switching to weekly to track any changes or problems; client is effectively self-monitoring.

At the end of her program, Joan and her counselor met with her supervisors to assess the success of the program by measuring the objectives originally set by Joan and her supervisors. It was determined that all objectives had achieved significant progress, and that Joan would retain her management position with the company.

Case 2

Guy Jansen, a mechanical engineer for a large firm, was provided with counseling after a supervisor identified him as a key employee that was "not being utilized to his potential within the organization." Guy was competent with his engineering tasks in his presenting area of responsibility, but supervisors were considering the possibility of developing his skills in another area such as site logistics so as to create a better match for the employee and the company. Difficulties had arisen for Guy in the area of professional communication, providing reason for the employer's concern.

Guy met weekly with his counselor and progress was followed carefully through various interventions that included: psychological assessment, interest and aptitude testing; assigned reading materials and related homework assignments; and topical training and education in-session.

Some sample notes from different benchmarked meetings follow.

Pre-client meeting with counselor

Consultation with immediate supervisor and HR manager, setting goals for client to develop through counseling program:

- Increase communication re: feedback from his boss;
- Develop tolerance for conflict;
- Increase problem solving ability; and
- “Market” to his boss by supplying a “heads up” before problems escalate and regularly reporting progress of projects.

Meeting 1

When asked what his expectations are by attending counseling sessions, client stated that he wanted to identify his interests/abilities and “get realigned,” which means a change or correction. He is aware that his current area is not one that “fits” him. He reports that he got his Engineering degree because of the availability of jobs for stability, and hoped for a more technical driven focus. Client reported he would want to move into Project Engineering, where, he would be dealing with informational packages VS hands-on tasks. He believes that he is better with concepts and ideas. He feels he would need to have experience and interest in machinery to really do a good job in his current area. He does lack some confidence, but the bottom line is that mechanical engineering does not seem to inspire him. Assessment was conducted.

Meeting 3

Previous assessments were reviewed with client. Results reflected some of client’s frustration in current position and emphasized the need to proceed with initial counseling goals. Client stated that he feels he should have ALL the facts before he updates. Client has issues regarding interfacing with authority figures from the standpoint of being questioned about problems and not knowing the answers; client reports that he will often respond that he “doesn’t know”. Client reported that he now knows that he needs to anticipate and better prepare for these meetings, and that hands-on work is scarier for him than the data/systems engineering area. The client would possibly function better if he lets go of his need to have all the facts before informing superiors. Decision making appears to be an issue for him unless he has the perceived safety of a substantive amount of facts.

Meeting 5

Client attended career counseling session, including 2 assessments. Client reporting and assessment revealed that he does want to get information across to others but often ends up in “analysis paralysis”. Client recently participated in an “empowerment” presentation at work, which he enjoyed and gave himself a “scaling” score of 8-9 re: competency on his portion of the presentation. His presentation dealt with concepts; analysis of 6 Sigma projects. He feels that working on 6 Sigma projects would be a good transition role for him as it is interdisciplinary, like a transferable skill. Client feels that he would be best utilized in a job that dealt more with concepts than hands-on. The concepts presented related to the future of how the “parts” fit together to see the whole picture. To him this affords him the ability to use his organizational and planning skills.

Client is beginning to understand that facts do not equal comfort or safety.

Meeting 7

Client reported that he is doing more follow up with colleagues, more research on career application, and is looking at programs or schools for the possibility of returning to school for a Master's or Ph.D. advanced degree. Client stated that he is checking internal bulletin boards for other opportunities within the organization. All of his testing to date shows that he is suited to be an engineer in some sort of more analytical position. He is enrolling in the company mentoring program for the potential of increasing his technical knowledge base, developing more organizational savvy and working on more effective ways of "marketing" himself to those who have authority over him.

At the end of his program, Guy and his counselor met with his supervisors to assess the success of the program by measuring the objectives originally set by Guy and his supervisors. It was determined that all objectives had achieved significant progress, and that Guy would transfer into a more suitable position within the company.

Ok, you are convinced that this might be worth a try. You may even have an employee or two in mind. Now, what do you look for in a provider of this type of counseling services?

This specialized type of program should consist of an intervention (up to twelve months or longer) designed to assist organizations in working with managers and their employee, who is experiencing and projecting the difficulties. It is critical that Masters and Ph.D. level Licensed Professional Counselors work with the employee, as well as with his/her manager(s), the human resources staff and, if needed, the employee's family. Management should also have the option to include peers and subordinates in the process.

The desired outcome is the reestablishment of self-esteem and the use of skills, which made the individual a worthy hire and a successful contributor. Sometimes the employee resumes a meaningful position in the organization; sometimes the employee leaves the organization to start a new career.

If the employee has burned too many bridges to repair, outplacement should be performed by the service provider at no extra cost. Through quality programs of intervention and counseling, the employee, the employee's family and all members of the organization will benefit.

Author



Susan Silvano

info@careermanagement.com
www.careermanagement.com



Prior to founding Career Management International in 1976, Susan Silvano spent four years as a guidance counselor and school psychologist in Rhode Island. Her main interest at that time was developing curricula that would assist high school and junior college students in developing their career potential. During this period, she wrote and administered a federal project "Survival '71", to further the career and vocational education of selected students. Previously, Susan had worked for several years with special education students, teaching skills and planning appropriate vocational areas for each pupil's ability level. Her interest throughout her career has been in assisting all individuals to maximize their emotional and vocational potentials.

Susan conducts numerous seminars in the areas of human resource development, stress management, quality, communications, and productivity; counsels clients in career enhancement, job transition, and retirement; and assists corporations in planning successful individual and group outplacement programs.

In addition to leading her successful company, Career Management International, Inc., Susan pioneers research for new product development and for automated development applications for CMI's Career Alignment Profile® (CAP) and Kingdomality®.

Susan received her Bachelor of Science degree at the University of Texas (Austin), and her Master of Guidance and Counseling degree at Florida Atlantic University, with advanced studies in statistics, human behavior/development, and psychology at both Rhode Island College and the University of Rhode Island.