When Employees Don't Follow Procedures

Part 4 of the Stealth Quality Series

Article length: about 3,900 words.

Introduction

The costs of workplace errors can run up to 20 percent of sales. That isn't profits, mind you, but revenue. Thus, it is obviously very important to minimize errors, so many of us have gone to lots of effort to design processes with exacting references called procedures or work instructions.

But sometimes our employees don't use these handy, very important resources. When that happens, what should we do?

It would be simple enough to implement a vigorous employee evaluation process and, like GE has done, regularly fire—um, lay off—the bottom 10 percent of performers: "Do as we think you should, or you're not for us."

If that works, it might be the right thing. Certainly we must take measurements before and after (and for quite awhile, I assert, because behavior can normalize over time), so we know if firing the rebellious is working as a strategy.

But wouldn't it be a shame if you lost good workers because simple rebellion wasn't the real problem? All of those trained employees would be out the door and must be replaced, tsk tsk. Very expensive! And our companies' secrets, if you had any, went with them. Surely there is a better way of dealing with resistance! This paper examines some of the reasons why employees don't behave as expected:

1. **Compulsive disobedience**
   Fetal Alcohol Syndrome conditions
   Illiteracy and learning disabilities
      Dyslexia
      ADD/ADHD
      Audio processing disorder CAPD

2. **Cognitive disobedience**
   The work-allergic employee
   The lethargic employee
   The fearful employee

3. **Explorations into solutions include:**
   The process of intelligent remediation
      Flow chart
      5-W approach
      Cost analysis

4. **No, we don't have any challenged people. What now?**
   Motivation
      Extrinsic behavior
      Intrinsic behavior

1. Compulsive disobedience

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome conditions

Along with psychologically treatable conditions like Narcissistic Personality Disorder, compulsive disobedience can be one symptom of the physiological fetal alcohol disorder, or a variant such as the alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disorder (ARND).

> ARND describes the functional or mental impairments linked to prenatal alcohol exposure. Impairments can include behavioral or cognitive abnormalities/learning difficulties, poor academic performance, and poor impulse control. ARND also influences problems with mathematical skills, memory, attention, and/or judgment (CDC).

A person with this disorder may consistently try to control his or her sphere of operation through endless excuses, lies, explanations, deflecting accountability (assigning blame) and the delusion that academic or work performance doesn't matter. Such a person might need multiple performance support approaches, including social support, special education, behavioral and cognitive therapy, and medications (Warren and Foudin).

To avoid creating a dragnet that mistakenly eliminates willing, but technically deficient performers, the hiring process should include careful screening to ensure that new employees will likely perform meet specific expectations.

What if there isn't much improvement after recruits are brought in to replace the "poor performers"? What if fear takes hold in the organization and mistakes are allowed to fester because no one will come forward with problems when they are paper cuts? It makes sense to approach the problems and not just the symptoms.

Illiteracy and learning disabilities

Dyslexia

This condition may be diagnosed when the letters on a page do not transfer to the brain's cognizance centers in proper condition or sequence. The letters may be blurred, mixed up, reversed or inverted; they may appear above or below the line in which they belong. The letters may "jump around" on the page or computer screen.

Dyslexia is a little-known condition, even though an estimated 10 percent of the workforce has it in some degree or form. Dyslexic people are very often gifted, creative and spirited; which makes their poor writing, math and language skills difficult for employers to comprehend. While it may not be a barrier to accomplishment, if the condition can't be "treated" the employee should be assigned appropriate tasks for his or her capabilities.

> Dyslexia should not be a bar to employment, but there could be health and safety implications. For example, some people with dyslexia are easily distracted, finding it

difficult to focus on one task at a time. Others have difficulty simultaneously processing auditory and visual information. There are obvious implications for a dyslexic worker seeking a career where such processing is integral to the post, such as an air traffic controller (PersonnelToday, 2005).

As a mechanical inspector on board a submarine repair ship, I had a colleague who was diagnosed dyslexic when she failed an exam during the rigorous Nondestructive Testing of Metals (NDT) School. Rather than disqualify and reassign her, the Navy gave her remedial training and she eventually passed the school. She was a good inspector, intelligent and caring. I watched, fascinated, as she wrote all of her words backwards, starting with the last letter. That, and whatever else she did to accommodate her condition, worked to the Navy's benefit and hers.

Dyslexia can be "treated" with, at least in some cases, a tinted plastic overlay for reading text on white paper or computer screens. For some reason the text doesn't "jump around" as much when dyslexic people view it on beige paper, for example. If your employee was otherwise smart and caring, wouldn't it be more profitable to buy them a colored overlay than to fire them for not following instructions—and then fish the labor pool for a "better" employee?

ADD/ADHD

Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) is a condition in which a person is bombarded with mental data of all kinds: sounds, images, movements, the task at hand, memories and his or her own fleeting thoughts. While one might think an ADD person can't focus on something, the opposite is true. He or she has trouble tuning out the sensory input the non-ADD person takes for granted. Far-off voices; air conditioning motors or fans; machinery or keyboards; a bird in the window; recollected conversations and other input can crowd the ADD person's consciousness.

This person may seem to not be listening when spoken to directly; loses things; dislikes, avoids, is distracted with and/or has trouble with math; or resists things that take a lot of mental effort for a long period of time (CDC). When combined with hyperactivity disorder, the ADD person may behave impulsively, interrupt discussions, fidget and/or get up or leave from positions where he or she is expected to remain for periods of time.

While an apparent lack of organizational skills or "scatterbrained" personality may point to poor potential, ADD/ADHD people are often highly intelligent, creative, and devoted workers. The condition(s) can be treated with behavior training and/or medical methods. It makes sense to approach the condition logically because ADD/ADHD *does not become cured upon reaching age 18*. Successful adults often learn to "deal with" their conditions, but often take care not to discuss them with coworkers.

Audio Processing Disorder

Do you get the feeling a person is ignoring you, is absent-minded or otherwise not on task when you are verbally addressing them? Very intelligent and creative people sometimes have Central Auditory Processing Disorder (CAPD).

Imagine learning a second language and being asked to use the new language while at work, before you feel truly ready. You may be "decoding" as you go, trying to digest verbal instructions so you can respond to them. The delay, measured in instants or seconds, may cause you to panic or get left behind if the information is presented in a rush, or if you are placed under pressure to immediately respond.

CAPD, like many other conditions, is protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). It affects the hearing system beyond the ear, where meaningful messages are separated from non-essential background sound and "good" information with good clarity is delivered to the intellectual centers of the brain, the central nervous system (Paton). CAPD people can increase their comprehension by jotting down short notes, accessing visual aides and written instructions, and with a hands-on "walk-through" of the subject or task being communicated.

2. Cognitive disobedience

Assuming there is no mutiny brewing, an employee may simply make a choice to defy an order or "do things my way." Assuming the instruction:

- involves no physical threat or safety violation, either real or perceived;
- is not illegal, nor ethically or morally questionable;
- is clear, plainly communicated and well-organized;
- is practical and achievable;
- runs consistent with the organization's procedures, strategy and culture,

employees can be reasonably expected to obey instructions and face consequences when deciding not to comply. Why wouldn't they? Let us look at a few dynamics to expect: the *work-allergic employee*, the *lethargic employee*, and the *fearful employee*.

The work-allergic employee

Sirota estimates that perhaps five percent of the workforce is "allergic to work" (Knowledge@ Wharton 2005). The employee whose performance is clearly and consistently unsatisfactory should not remain in the organization, or at his or her position if better suited for a different one. This poorly performing employee consumes an unacceptable portion of his or her manager's time. Sirota, Mischkind and Meltzer (2005) identify three general types:

- Those who, with competent guidance, clear goals, and considerable encouragement, can improve to a satisfactory level in their current position.
- Those who are in the wrong job or organization and will not improve until they are correctly placed.
- Those who do poorly no matter what guidance they receive or in what job or organization they are placed.

It is important to attend to poor performers without a lengthy "Maybe they'll come around" delay. Poor performers aggravate the organization's good performers, who are very likely intimately aware of the behavior problem. Management's performance in dealing with these

workers, or not doing so in a timely way, earned unsatisfactory marks in *nearly one-half* of surveyed employees in both unionized and non-union companies (Sirota, Mischkind and Meltzer 2005).

Failure to deal with such workplace poison does impact product and/or service quality, and should be dealt with using articulated, fairly applied procedures where consequences are assigned within legal limits and protocol guidelines.

The lethargic employee

Why does any given employee behave in a listless, mechanical or detached manner? Why has the spark died—you know, the one we saw for the first six months or so?

In "The Art of Happiness At Work" the Dalai Lama (2003) notes how easily employees lose, and how we need to "recognize our interconnection and interdependence":

> At least on that basis one will be more willing to work cooperatively with others, whether or not one has any special feeling or affection or compassion toward them. On that level, on the level of building teamwork, compassion or empathy is not even required. However, if you want to enhance and strengthen the relationship, move it to a deeper and much more satisfying level, then empathy and compassion would be required.

The Dalai Lama goes on to describe that reaching one's sense of fulfillment in the workplace is easier said than done. Each employee faces his or her own personal challenges and may achieve differing levels of satisfaction in work viewed as limited, personally unrewarding or thankless.

For these reasons it falls *more* on management, not less, to communicate the contribution and value of each employee—from the night janitor to the CEO—as a vital part of the organization. In times of change and challenge, and in times of copasetic comfort, management establishes the mood and is overall responsible for the results of such leadership—or its lack.

Does the lethargic employee have personal issues that intrude upon his or her consciousness while at work? Financial problems, family emotional dynamics and loneliness play critical roles in personal well-being as well as professional performance. Employees who are distracted, frustrated or pressured by personal issues are not only slower and more prone to errors; they may also internalize and fail to promptly access the teamwork dynamic to alleviate or solve problems. Thus the errors' effects may be compounded by a failure to address them soon enough to minimize damage. Organizations ignore these human components at their peril, depending on the individual and how critical are his or her duties.

The fearful employee

If people naturally fear change, wouldn't employees also be fearful of pay raises? Wouldn't they fear safety guards being placed on machinery, kind feedback from a new manager or a suggestion to change a process so better quality will result?

People are likely to be suspicious of changes when the changes are perceived as threats. Fear will register in various degrees among individuals; some will no doubt feel insecure very early, or nearly constantly while others show great resilience.

Adverse Industrial Hygiene conditions such as vibration, noise, noxious gases/vapors or environment (excessive heat, cold and/or humidity) can have subtle or profound effects on human performance. Changing behaviors out of self-preservation can manifest themselves in a range between hesitations to refusing to do certain tasks. Is your workplace safe, healthy, well lit and as free from stressors (even noise can have quite a deleterious effect on performance) as practical?

A fearful employee, especially when the task is critical or dangerous, may hesitate to perform as requested. If the task simply cannot deviate from procedures you may need to move the employee to a different task; insisting, threatening, exhorting or cajoling him or her will not abolish hesitation or eliminate a phobia.

Does your organization suit employees to tasks, or tasks to employees? If training does not improve performance without direct supervision, the employee may be unsuited for the task. Consider reassignment, or counseling if the problem surfaces suddenly or reoccurs.
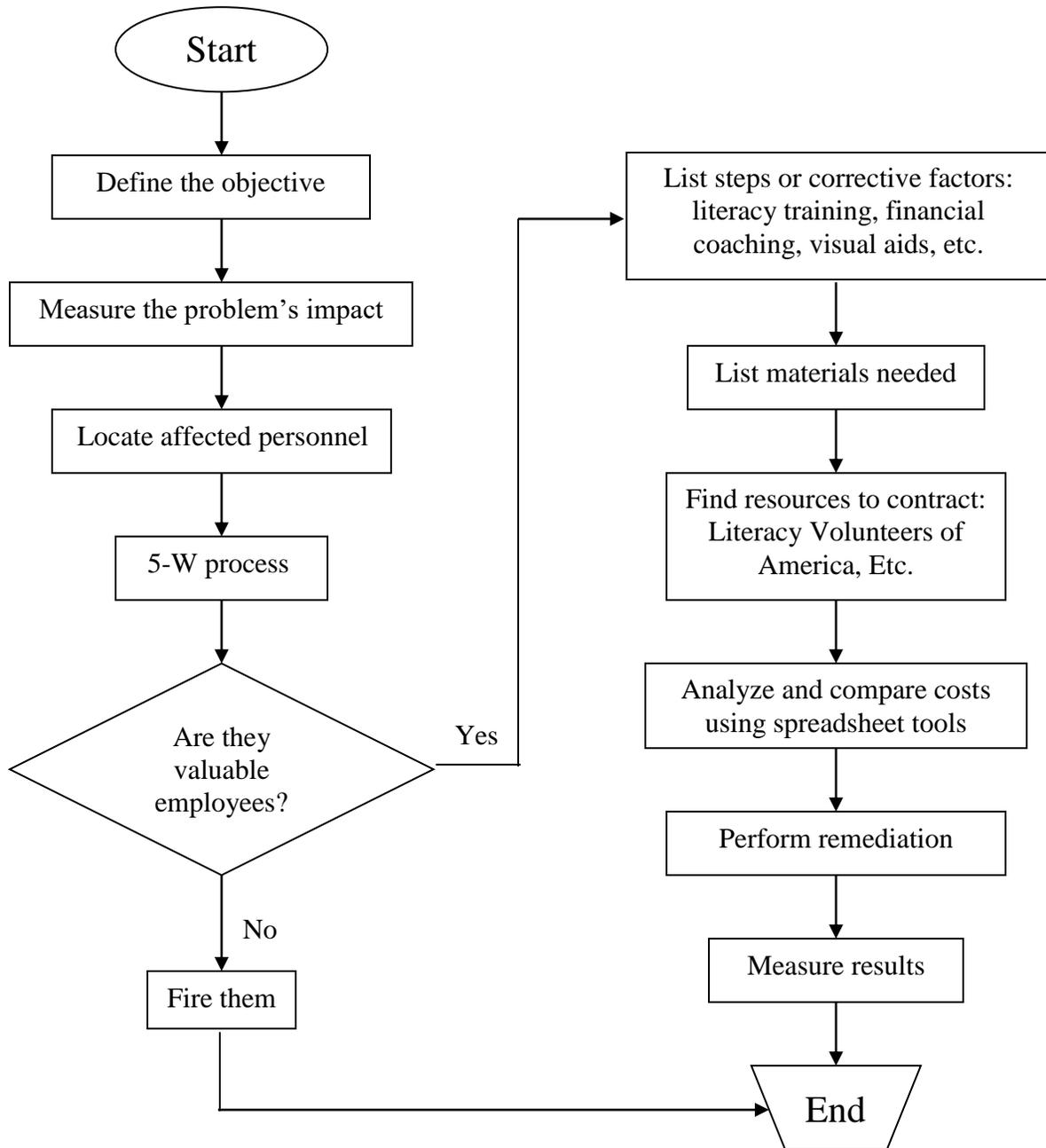
3. Explorations into solutions

<u>The process of intelligent remediation</u>

Flow charting the remediation process

We in organizational management will eventually find (whether we want to or not) ourselves at the core of an uncomfortable problem's resolution. It could be a crossroads of the organization's development because the employees really do make the company. We *must* deal with employee issues as carefully as we would diagnose an event of equipment failure because our workforce is just as great an asset as capital investments.

Consider it a decision-making process, which can be approached logically as the suggested flowchart shows:

Employee remediation process

Start

Define the objective

Measure the problem's impact

Locate affected personnel

5-W process

Are they valuable employees?

No

Fire them

Yes

List steps or corrective factors: literacy training, financial coaching, visual aids, etc.

List materials needed

Find resources to contract: Literacy Volunteers of America, Etc.

Analyze and compare costs using spreadsheet tools

Perform remediation

Measure results

End

If you prefer, of course you can perform the cost analysis before committing to remediation, or deciding upon reassignment, or firing the personnel.

5-W approach

The "5-W approach" can be applied to human performance as well as defect analysis.

Why, why, why, why, why? The **5-W** approach to problem solving	
Question: Why does ABC happen?	Answer: DEF.
Question: Why does DEF happen?	Answer: GHI.
Question: Why does GHI happen?	Answer: JKL.
Question: Why does JKL happen?	Answer: MNO.
Question: Why does MNO happen?	Answer: PQR.

How far should we go to solve problems? The answer depends on the organization's culture, the extent of need, and depth/type of problems.   Obviously we can't heal all ills; nor should we try. We can, however, examine the needs, prioritize, make plans and consider it a part of our personnel strategy.

Cost analysis

You can use the Compensation Costs you found in Worksheet 1 and apply them to an adapted version of Worksheet 2 from the Conquering Turnover Costs article. Do not change any of the formulas; only change the yellow instruction cell and the white **Information** cells for Lines 1 through 13 (Column B) as shown here:

4. We don't have these problems. All our employees are great readers, don't have CAPD or any other challenges. What now?

<u>Motivation</u>

If **motivation** is defined as *a reason for doing something,* **behavior**, defined as *the way one conducts oneself,* can be considered the response toward motivation.

Public schools have sought to engineer students' behavior through the generations with methods ranging from corporal punishment to empowering students. Two starkly different approaches have been developed and strategically deployed to build desirable responses to motivation: *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* behavior management.

Extrinsic behavior

Extrinsic behavior is the type influenced by both good and bad outcomes. Our society's legal system is built upon it, and traditional school disciplinary programs are as well. The first event results in X; the second event results in Y, and the third results in Z. If X or Y is great enough, the program's owner reserves the right to exert maximum penalty or reward right away.

The subject in extrinsic behavior programs is expected to behave well, being aware of good or bad consequences. Usually he or she is promptly told when the error occurs, and occasionally given more formal "feedback" with evaluations, public attention and/or rewards. A well-structured program should include specific descriptions of behaviors from the point of their relevance, and technical expectations plainly laid out as the employee becomes indoctrinated.

Not telling workers exactly what we want sets them up for failure. How often have we felt dismay during our first employee evaluation, where we learn what we will be judged on for the first time? In my own experience, far too often. Before expecting something definite from our workers, we should *tell them what we want* in a manner that clearly, consistently and reliably (such as written and/or visual process instructions) promotes long-range success.

Intrinsic behavior

The intrinsic behavior method assumes the person *wants* to do right because he or she cares about outcomes, regardless of personal repercussions. Early educational intrinsic behavior programs are designed around clearly setting forth expectations in a series of graduations known as rubrics. The programs frequently revisit and reinforce the desired behavior goals, and call on the subject(s) to affirm the behavior and compare it to the desired goal.

Managers may subscribe to intrinsic behavior theories when they conduct periodic process reviews, ask employees to help troubleshoot a problem or discover how to reduce time needed to complete a task. They theorize the employee who feels a personal connection to his or her job will more likely perform well.

When done regularly, strange things might happen:

1. The operators turn into consultants. A BusinessWeek magazine article on Toyota featured a production line worker. His suggestion to change installation order of engine parts (install the radiator later in the assembly process) saved money from reduced back injuries and time to assemble. The message was clear: employees can add absolute value to process improvement if their input is solicited in a sincere and organized fashion.

2. The operator gains some sense of feeling that his or her knowledge is valued. Have processes been fine-tuned to the point where all sense of craftsmanship is lost to mechanized redundancy? This may save mistakes in theory, but people want to have a sense of relevancy to their work.

What might this ultimately mean? When groups--perhaps everyone involved on a certain line or with product x—all find themselves dependent on each other, peer pressure can result in internal change not reachable by management. They may gang up and find ways to improve processes, or root out or support low contributors.

When asked how his consultancy approaches motivation problems in client workplaces, David Sirota insists most personnel enter the job with plenty of motivation. The "honeymoon," as he calls it, lasts about six months:

> We are often asked how to motivate employees. Our response is, that's a silly question. The real question is: 'How do you keep management from destroying motivation?' When we look at the data we find that people coming to a new job are quite enthusiastic. Most of them are very happy to be there and looking forward to meeting their new coworkers. But as you study the data you find morale, or enthusiasm, declines precipitously after five or six months. One theory is that there is a natural honeymoon that is bound to end. And yet we find that in 10% of companies the honeymoon continues throughout a worker's entire career. So there are organizations that are able to maintain enthusiasm (Knowledge@Wharton 2005).

Tying pay to success is becoming popular. In "The Sin of Wages" Abernathy argues that steady pay has resulted in an entitlement attitude and lack of caring. In "The Enthusiastic Employee," Sirota, Mischkind and Meltzer don't disagree with performance pay but caution to make it fair by rewarding groups or teams; to be transparent in structure; and distribute the pay equitably. They hasten to say performance pay should supplement, not replace, competitive base salary.

The employees *want* to do well, these consultants maintain, but become frustrated with insufficient training or equipment/materials, bureaucracy like useless paperwork or other constraints to their good results. Treating the entire workforce like the 5 percent work-allergic minority is certain to be a problem:

> About 16% of the companies we deal with have a hostile workforce. But the bulk of the problem is not hostility. It is that people have become indifferent. That is the silent killer. There are people who just don't want to work for whatever reason. They become

troublemakers and you have to deal with them in a very tough way. You have to focus on them. But you don't then generalize from them to the rest of the workforce. The mistake we make is we feel we have to be consistent, that we have to have the same rules for everybody. So companies are consistent in treating everybody as a child or a criminal. That's very, very destructive (Knowledge@Wharton 2005).

Know thy workers. In The Rise of the Creative Class, Richard Florida warns that today's young employees are largely not keen about thankless, mindless labor. These people want creativity and/or a sense of self in their work. While we can't suddenly become a craftsman economy again, nor should we, perhaps these spirited people would perform better if they sensed a greater relevancy in their work, a larger stake in the outcome.

Conclusion

Unless we decide to treat all employees as though they all think and respond in the same ways, we must acknowledge that people behave well, or unsatisfactorily, for various reasons. Some behaviors or challenges are made consciously, while others can't be helped. When deciding the right course of action to approach these factors it makes sense to understand them better. It makes sense to make the resolution fit the problem so we can continue doing our best with our best employees—the heart and soul of any organization.

Sources for dealing with workplace disabilities:

Adults with ADHD, Learning Disabilities Face Workplace Anxiety:
Available: http://www.healthyplace.com/Communities/ADD/site/story_adult_adhd_work.htm

Job Accommodation Network: Free help for employers and workers.
Available: http://www.jan.wvu.edu/links/index.htm

Meeting the Challenge of Conformity
Available: http://www.ldanatl.org/aboutld/adults/workplace/conformity.asp

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