



By James E. Leemann, Ph.D.

## Rewiring the manager's mindset

### Turning whiners into winners

Ever notice safety and health professionals whining about managers with no safety and health expertise? Or complaining about not getting any respect? Even *Las Vegas Sun* reporter, Alexandra Berzon, wrote an article entitled “Safety engineers say they get little respect” during last year’s ASSE conference.<sup>1</sup>

Say you supervise safety and health professionals who project this kind of negative sentiment. How do you manage these individuals so they convey a positive attitude toward their customers within your organization?

Charles J. Jacobs, in his new book “Management Rewired,” presents some startling new neurological research on the use of rewards, punishment and feedback in a manager-employee relationship — and how these managerial practices do not produce the desired effect a manager expects.<sup>2</sup>

#### Self-defeating traditions

For Jacobs, these managerial practices are “self-defeating” and should be stopped if managers want their employees to become highly effective and valued. In the case of our negative safety pro (let’s call him Dan) he often feels his **reward** is never enough (i.e., he receives a cost-of-living raise and he expects a 10 percent raise). **Punishing** for poor performance leads to anger, which causes Dan to retaliate in some fashion. Poor performance **feedback** is rarely accepted as constructive. **Prescribing** corrective actions actually relieves Dan from having to take responsibility for his actions or his work. When the manager sets Dan’s

**objectives**, if Dan fails to meet these objectives, he will claim they were unrealistic. As far as **closely supervising** Dan, he will revert to a cat-and-mouse/manager-employee relationship game.

All of us fall into one of four dominant orientations as to how we engage in our work — *Reactivist*, *Inactivist*, *Preactivist*, and *Interactivist*.<sup>3</sup> Which orientation describes you?

*Reactivists* are not satisfied with the present nor with the way things are going; however, they like the way things once were. Faced with any change initiative, reactivists will try to unmake the changes, either overtly or covertly.<sup>4</sup>

*Inactivists* are satisfied with the way things are. They are not interested in returning to the past. Faced with any change initiative, they will try to prevent the change and stake out an inflexible position.<sup>5</sup>

*Preactivists* are unwilling to return to the past or settle for the present, but seek out the future because it will be better than the present or the past. Faced with any change initiative, they will seek to accelerate it, taking advantage of every opportunity along the way.<sup>6</sup>

*Interactivists* are unwilling to return to the past, to settle for the present, or to accept the future that appears to confront them. *Interactivists* refuse to accept that the future is largely out of our control. The future is largely subject to creation, in which we have a hand.<sup>7</sup>

#### Turning around negative attitudes

So what does Dan’s manager do?

Assuming he wants to retain Dan’s services, his manager begins by drawing upon the *Participative Principle* of Interactive Planning in systems thinking. As Russ Ackoff has written, “It is better to plan for oneself, no matter how badly, than to be planned for by others, no matter



how well.”<sup>8</sup>

Couple Ackoff’s *Participative Principle* with Jacob’s *Managing Upside Down* approach to manager-employee relationships and Dan just might be convinced to change his negative perspective into one of being an *Interactivist*.

Using Jacob’s *Managing Upside Down* approach, Dan’s manager tells Dan that he will not be dictating Dan’s objectives for the coming year and that Dan must create his own objectives (including input from operations leaders), critique his own performance, and when Dan’s performance falls short, he is to establish his own corrective action. The key is to place as much responsibility on Dan shoulders as possible. Also, Dan’s manager describes both the relevance and the importance of Dan’s role as a safety professional to the success of the organization.

Making the employee fully responsible for his performance changes the manager-employee relationship dynam-

ic, primarily because the employee's self-esteem is positively correlated to his performance and the success of his corrective actions.

In this new manager-employee relationship, Dan's manager focuses on asking Dan questions rather than telling Dan what to do. By changing the manager-employee relationship through asking questions rather than telling Dan the answers, Dan finds himself doing more self-critiquing.<sup>10</sup>

### Measuring performance

So how does Dan's manager measure Dan's performance? First, he establishes a system that links Dan's compensation to Dan's objectives, which are directly coupled to the performance of the organization. Then he asks Dan to create the system by which he wants to be measured. Dan designs a system that measures customer satisfaction and peer review appraisals. In Dan's case, his safety "customers" are those indi-

viduals that ask for and utilize Dan's safety expertise. The appraisal form must contain questions that focus on areas where Dan's peers think he needs improvement. Questions that cover positive interactions among peers need to specifically highlight examples. In the end, Dan's manager is responsible for evaluating Dan's performance.

Rigorous accountability must be applied if the employee doesn't achieve his or her objectives. If the employee's corrective action(s) do not work, their fate (i.e., subsequent year's compensation increase) should be the same as that of any other employee whose work has not succeeded as it should. Under this approach, tough performance management becomes much easier. Obviously, if all succeeds, his or her compensation raise has been achieved.<sup>11</sup>

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- 1 Berzon, A. Safety engineers say they get little respect. In the *Las Vegas Sun*, July 21, 2008.
- 2 Jacobs, C.S. *Management Rewired – Why Feedback Doesn't Work and Other Surprising Lessons from the Latest Brain Science*. Portfolio, Penguin Group, NY, NY. 2009.
- 3 Ackoff, R.L. *Creating the Corporate Future – Plan or be Planned For*. John Wiley & Sons. NY, NY. 1981.
- 4 Ackoff, pp. 53.
- 5 Ackoff, pp. 56.
- 6 Ackoff, pp. 58.
- 7 Ackoff, pp. 61-62.
- 8 Ackoff, pp. 66.
- 9 Jacobs, pp. 83.
- 10 Jacobs, pp. 83.
- 11 Jacobs, pp. 85.



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