Coaching has traditionally been seen as reserved for senior managers and top-line executives. Going in some way against this stereotype, we present how first-line employees and first-line managers can be coached to improve their own productivity and work well-being.

The approach, which is outline below, proved successful in perhaps the most difficult case thinkable - manufacturing production lines. It is there, indeed, where work well-being is ranked somewhere at the lowest levels among all professions and where every further increase in productivity today is seen possible only through optimization of processes and technology.

About the Clients

The results presented here come from two projects conducted in two long standing small-sized footwear manufacturing companies in Central Europe that produce on hired labour basis (the purchaser supplies all the material, assembly instructions, production sequence plans, standard times, etc.) for Adidas and LOWA and, as such, inevitably reaching the cutting edge in terms of technology and its optimization, quality, flexibility, effectivity and failure rates.

The production line workers, whose number was circa 220 in one company and 300 in the other, were paid based on their performance.

Realization

The employees coached were production line workers and their direct supervisors.

Production line workers

Production line workers formed groups of up to 20 closest coworkers, which, over the period of three months, attended biweekly two-hour coaching sessions.

The coaching process started with a discussion on the following two topics:

Ideal Employee - I want to become one!

Each group outlined their own image of an ideal employee - his or her work attitude, discipline, diligence and dependability, relationships with colleagues, commitment to an organization, willingness to contribute extra effort, etc.

Afterwards, group members identified what specifically this all meant for them personally - how these characteristics apply to an employee in their field of work, in their job position, in their work team and in their organization.

Let’s make our work more enjoyable!

Each group finds answers to the following questions: When do I enjoy working? When do my coworkers enjoy working? When does my supervisor enjoy working?

Comparing answers to these three questions, the line workers came to realize that the work of each one of the aforementioned ones is most enjoyable under the very same condition - one enjoys working when all of his or her coworkers and supervisors enjoy working. The workers easily reasoned out that if they want to enjoy their work more, they have to support one another and also the supervisors in their work. They also realized that by doing this all of them would not only feel better but also become more productive!

The outcomes of these group discussions were summarized and written down using the well-known coaching wheel and then be used for goal setting throughout the rest of the project.

Process of improvement

In the course of each two weeks between successive coaching sessions, the production workers worked towards improvements in the area they prioritized last time. They followed the action plan they had set up with the help of a coach and on which they all had agreed upon.

In the beginning of each coaching session (starting the second one), the workers first self-evaluated the progress they had made:

- How are we proceeding?
- What has changed?
- What did we managed to achieve?
- What else do we need to do in order to reach the goals we set for ourselves?

Next, the group singled out an area to focus on during the following two weeks. Examples of the areas prioritized often included: friendlier atmosphere, punctuality, mutual support and trust, compliance with safety rules and work practices, cleaner workspace and restrooms, etc.

The coach supported the group in setting clear, shared objectives, helped them identify concrete steps to move towards the objectives, and led the
preparation of an action plan shared by a whole group. The well-known GROW coaching model was used.

Supervisors

Coaching sessions with the supervisors were conducted in the same manner.

It was important that the supervisors always met up after the sessions with all the groups of production line workers had finished - so that they could have been informed about the areas their subordinates had chosen to focus on, about the agreements their subordinates had made as well as about the steps their subordinates had committed to follow.

Besides working on improvements in the areas they prioritized for themselves, the supervisors set the goal of of supporting their subordinates in achieving their goals.

Results

A lasting increase in productivity of production line workers by 12% in the first factory and by 15% in the second one (reconfirmed after 14 months after the project had finished) was recorded and confirmed formally by the top managements (see References at the end of this document).

Further benefits highlighted by the managers include:

- better working atmosphere,
- better personal hygiene,
- cleaner and safer workplace,
- better maintenance of machinery,
- better attitude towards the need to stay overtime and come to work on weekends when meeting tight deadlines,
- practically zero absenteeism.

Examples of Improvements

Let us look at some of the improvements that have led to the aforementioned productivity increase and better working conditions:

Absenteeism

One of the major issues that frustrated the line workers was the abuse of sick days by some of their coworkers. In each group, there were individuals ready to do anything in order to avoid coming to work on weekends - especially when they would be assigned to a hard yet not-so-financially-attractive operation. With the help of a coach, the groups were able to discussed the problem constructively, without blaming one another.

Coworkers explained to those problematic individuals that it was them, indeed, who were affected by their absenteeism most, not the supervisor or the company. As the work must have be covered anyway, someone had to fill in for the absentee. What’s more, that someone was often less skilled in that specific operation. As a result, the whole production line was stressed, all presented workers must have compensated the lost productivity and worked overtime. The individuals with attendance problems stayed surprised declaring they had never looked at the consequences of their behavior from this perspective. Although it might sound hard to believe, every single one of them told the rest of the group how sorry he or she was and promised to never abuse sick days again. Such an approach eventually turned out to be far more effective than sophisticated absence policies and disciplinary procedures.

Shift change

Another serious problem many line workers complained about was that their coworkers infringed the standard half an hour lapse between shifts, which was scheduled for cleaning of the production area and for preventive maintenance of the machinery. In order to earn more, some individuals used to keep working during that time as well, and, as a result, new shifts often started with conflicts and delays caused by the need to clean the area and set up the machines. Not rarely, the daily maintenance of machines was completely neglected.

With the help of a coach, the groups of line workers discussed the problem as well as all its consequences, and promised to one another to finish work when scheduled and do the cleaning and maintenance on time.

Overlooked majority

Coaching helped the supervisors realize they had been paying attention almost exclusively to the most productive workers and to those having problems to meet productivity goals - usually newly hired workers. For example, they spent too much time trying to puzzle out why some two or three workers normally exceeding standards by 6% are a little bit less productive today, and neglected to manage up the performance of the average ones. Yet for the overall productivity, it is the performance of these 90% what counts the most.

Praise

Supervisors realized that everybody wants his or her performance, effort and improvement to be noticed and acknowledged, and started praising good work of all of their subordinates. Before, they used to only compliment the best ones,
which demotivated the rest: “As if we did nothing!”, “She would never be so productive without our contribution!”, “It is because she was assigned to an easier operation!”, etc.

Corrective feedback

The supervisors realized that the corrective feedback they had been giving had often been seen as criticism by their subordinates. They figured out that it is because of this why the line workers had often reacted by arguing, buck-passing and blame-throwing.

After openly discussing the issue with their subordinates and with the help from a coach, the supervisors came out with a solution - instead of saying what was wrong, they would say what was good and what exactly needs to be improved. They also realized that an explanation should always be given of how exactly the improvement can be achieved as well as why it is needed.

Final Notes

- More than one half of the line workers had only primary education.
- The primary goal the employees pursued was, in fact, not an increased productivity but becoming better employees, professionals and coworkers, and making the life easier for themselves.
- No monetary incentives were introduced. No form of training, mentoring or supervision was used. No new policy, protocols or procedures were needed.
- The problems production workers successfully coped with are exactly those that are commonly identified as hampering the productivity in most manufacture.
- The outlined scheme of the coaching process can be used, without modification, to coach for performance of employees in other first-line professions, such as salesmen, office workers, waiting staff, retail clerks, etc.

About the Author

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Starting as a mathematician and researcher, he moved to the field of management consultancy. He currently works at Karierovy koucing, Ltd., Slovak republic as a consultant, coach and lecturer in the areas of employee engagement, performance management, coaching and mind mapping.

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References

In the first quarter of 2009, our company launched a project aimed at increasing the overall productivity on footwear manufacturing lines. The project had the form of group discussions with coaches of Karierovy koucing, Ltd. As early as from the very beginning, we observed a change in our production line workers’ work attitude. Now, 14 months after this project based on team coaching finished, we can confirm an increase in productivity of production line workers by 15%.

Rimavská Sobota, July 30, 2010
Eva Moncoľová
CEO at BOTEX, Ltd.
Responsible for the manufacturing division

With the help of the coaches of Karierovy koucing, Ltd., we focused on productivity improvements. The coaches led a number of group discussions with production line workers centered around the factors that affect their productivity. Now, almost 2 months after the project finished, we observe an increase in productivity by 12%.

Klenovec, July, 2010
Ing. Ján Kantor
CEO at EVASPORT, Ltd.