

Improving Employee Satisfaction through Training or Something Else?

by Joanne Letourneau

Tales from the Field, a new monthly column, consists of reports of evidence-based performance improvement practice and advice, presented by graduate students, alumni, and faculty of Boise State University's Instructional and Performance Technology department.

The Field

St. Mary's Hospital has been serving the south central region of Wisconsin since 1912. It offers a full range of inpatient and outpatient treatment and diagnostic services in primary care and nearly all specialties. The mission of the hospital is "Through our exceptional health care services, we reveal the healing presence of God." The hospital strives to accomplish the mission by achieving the following goals – Exceptional Patient Care (Clinical Outcomes, Safety, and Satisfaction); Exceptional Commitment (Employees and Physicians); and Exceptional Financial Performance and Growth.

In support of the mission and goals, the hospital's Sterile Processing Department provides supplies and equipment used in patient care, in a manner which assures maximum safety, economy and efficiency. Functioning 24/7, the department has 5 functional areas: decontamination, prep and package, sterilization, storage, and distribution. There are 27 employees, including 2 who provide clerical support and 6 who are assigned to a "shift charge" role to oversee the job tasks of the respective shifts. The entry-level education requirement is a high school diploma. Many of the employees are over 50 years of age and are long-term employees.

The Level of Employee Satisfaction

The Sterile Processing Department's 2006 employee satisfaction survey identified specific opportunities for improving employee satisfaction. For example, one of the opportunities related to the employees' perceptions toward developing *fair and clearly stated standards for performance*. The current department results showed that 51.8% of the employees were satisfied on this issue. A goal for 2007 was set to improve employee perceptions by 25%. (Note: These two percentages are not the actual values in order to protect the confidentiality of the organizational information.) The department manager initially requested an interpersonal skill training program as a method to increase satisfaction with clearly stated performance standards. However, the author further investigated the issue as a class project in Professor Chyung's IPT 536 Foundations of Instructional and Performance Technology class at Boise State University.

The Contributing Factors

According to Thomas Gilbert (1996), "when behavior is inadequate for competent performance, we may alter it either by altering a person's repertory or by changing the supporting environment; or, of course, we might do both" (p. 81). Using Gilbert's Behavior Engineering Model (BEM), the author developed specific questions to help determine potential contributing factors of the employee satisfaction issue. During the analysis, she employed interviews, focus groups, and a survey using the elements of performance within the job description. The following list reflects sample questions from each category of Gilbert's BEM.

Environmental Supports:

- **Data** – Do you know what is expected of you during your work shift? What kind of feedback about your work do you get? How often do you get feedback and from whom?
- **Instruments/Resources** – Do you have the equipment necessary to do your work (why/why not)? What type of reference materials, job aids, etc. do you have as guidance about work processes and procedures?
- **Incentives** - What methods are used to recognize you for the work you do in the department?

Person's Repertory of Behavior:

- **Knowledge** – If you are unfamiliar with how to do the job you are assigned, how do you get the information you need?
- **Capacity** – What physical requirements, problem solving approaches, and interpersonal skills are needed to do your job?
- **Motives** – What is it about your job that keeps you coming to work everyday?

The analysis revealed deficiencies in the two areas of the BEM - data and instruments/resources. Specifically, the following problems were identified:

- Lack of consistency in processes (expectations & feedback)
- Inaccessible and incomplete reference materials (expectations & resources)

Those problems also resulted in providing inconsistent training to new employees, which in turn contributed to causing them to think that their supervisors used inconsistent and/or unfair standards for evaluating their performance.

Project Recommendations

As a result of the analysis for the improvement area, the department manager agreed to take the following actions to establish and support *fair standards of performance*:

- Identify one department work area in which performance standards are not well defined.
- Identify one job task, within the identified work area, where staff perform the task inconsistently.
- Develop clear performance standards for the identified task.
- Review and revise reference materials which support the identified task.
- Assess the ability of all staff to perform the task based on the stated performance standard.
- Provide consistent training and feedback for staff who do not perform the task according to the performance standard.

IPT-Grounded Advice

As this tale shows, performance improvement practitioners need to conduct a thorough cause analysis to find the sources of a performance issue before considering solutions to the performance problem. This tale showed that although the initial request was to provide an interpersonal skill training program, by building rapport with the manager and working together to apply the BEM, the improvement approach took a different course to improve employee satisfaction.

References

Gilbert, T. F. (1996). *Human competence: Engineering worthy performance* (Tribute ed.). Washington D.C.: The International Society for Performance Improvement.

Author bios

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