

Retail Operations Management

The Area Manager as the Performance Management Coach

As a customer how often have you experienced poor service from people obviously unsuitable for a retail environment? As a retail executive, how often have you observed poor performance or unsatisfactory behaviour within your own network of branches? If so, you have probably wondered why branch managers tolerate under-performance or poor behaviour? **Jane Tatler Burns** has been supporting Retail Operations in performance management issues for over ten years and believes both the problem and the remedy is at area management level.

Poor performance management is by far the most difficult aspect of any managers', job and the reluctance to 'grasp the nettle' when performance or behaviour issues emerge is certainly a concern in many organisations. But at the end of the day that is what branch managers are paid to do and not doing so will certainly adversely affect; service, team morale, sales and ultimately the bottom line.

So why does this reluctance exist? Why do so many branch managers back away from doing this important aspect of the job and tolerate poor performance rather than address it? The problems and challenges that need to be overcome are many, and the common reasons and 'excuses' for not doing so are as follows:

Risky – Managers feel addressing poor performance is risky; the employee may 'walk' and leave the branch short handed. With resources so tight, one person down can hit the business hard. There is also a concern that team moral and motivation may be damaged by tackling an underperformer, and that the team may even turn against the manager. Another risk in the back of many managers' mind is that discussions about poor performance could turn into a heated argument and they themselves could end up with bullying accusations.

Complicated - Any manager can manage good people, you just point them in the right direction and leave them to get on with the job. Any manager can manage a gross-misconduct issue because there are normally clear facts to work on and a clear process to follow. Performance and behaviour management is not so

straight forward - it is very seldom clear cut or black or white. It is 'grey area' stuff and often involves opinions, perceptions and subjectivity. If managers feel they cannot quantify or justify their concerns clearly enough, then they become reluctant to do so.

Time Consuming – There is a great deal of work to be done when dealing with poor performance such as counseling discussions, written reviews and objective setting etc. and many managers feel they do not have the time to sort out performance issues. Because of this addressing poor performance becomes low on the priority list. "It is not worth the hassle" is a common comment to be heard by many managers.

Denial – Many managers are either 'blind' to the fact that a person is underperforming or they just simply see it as not serious enough to address. There are even managers who believe that it is not their job to tackle performance and behaviour issues and that some day, someone will come along and do it for them. Many of the before mentioned points tend to be excuses rather than reasons, but there are a number of more important points that need to be taken into consideration.

Lack of Training – No new manager had any previous experience of performance and behaviour issues when they move into a manager role for the first time. New managers often inherit performance or behaviour issues from the previous manager and yet are not given relevant training for tackling these issues from the onset. Giving managers basic employment law training and the company procedures

to read is not the 'practical' training they need, and it is certainly insufficient on its own. All branch managers need a thorough grounding in the correct use of performance management tools and practice in their use. Job specs, probationary periods, reviews, counselling sessions, appraisals and the disciplinary procedures are all useful performance and behaviour tools when used correctly and at the right time.

Very often this vital training is not provided early on in a new managers' appointment, it tends to be given later on in their careers when much of the damage has already been done.

Courage and Confidence – Doing something risky, difficult and complicated requires both courage and confidence. Unfortunately, many branch managers lack both when it comes to dealing with confrontation. Even if managers are given the knowledge and skill to tackle performance or behaviour issues, they will not do so without these essential qualities. (Skill vs Will)

The Area Manager as the Coach

The problems and challenges are undoubtedly great and many may see their particular issue(s) as un-resolvable. However there is someone available to branch managers who can help them overcome many of their problems and challenges, and that someone is their boss - the Area Manager.

Guidance, Coaching and Support

The Area Manager is the only person who can guide, coach and support branch managers in the addressing of performance or behaviour issues. They can un-complicate the issues and help their managers build a strong case for

presenting to the respective employee(s). The Area Manager can also help the manager to minimise the risk of bullying claims, by ensuring that correct procedures are being used at all times, and that the issues area dealt with in a totally professional way.

More importantly, a good Area Manager will 'encourage' and give the manager the much-needed confidence he/she needs to take on these issues in the first place. The Area Manager is the only one who can do this, but unfortunately in many instances this is just not happening. By not supporting and encouraging many Area Managers are unconsciously (or consciously) influencing a reluctance to tackle performance or behaviour issues within their branches.

Why is this happening?

Asking for support and guidance

Unfortunately, many branch managers are reluctant to approach their Area Managers when they experience performance or behaviour issues within the team. If the matter falls into the 'gross misconduct' category, then managers will contact the Area Manager (and HR function) in the first instance. But for 'grey' area performance or behaviour matters, they tend to keep the issues to themselves. The reasons for this are as follows:

Many branch managers often feel:

- The Area Manager may see it as a trivial matter and not important enough to bring to the Area Manager's attention.
- That seeking advice and guidance will be seen in a negative way by the Area Manager.

- The Area Manager will go into fault finding mode rather than helping find solutions.
- The Area Managers may start questioning the branch manager's ability to do the job.
- There is also a feeling that area managers themselves do not know what to do either. "Bring me solutions not problems" is a common comment heard by branch managers when they have taken a 'people' issue to their Area Manager.

Unfortunately, many branch managers have in the past gone to their Area Managers for advice and support on poor performance issues but when they did so they received a negative response which resulted in them not asking for support again. Even when there is a change of Area Manager.

Offering support and guidance

Unfortunately there are only a few Area Managers who actively encourage branch managers to talk about their 'people' issues or are prepared to probe below the surface to identify performance or behaviour problems that may be affecting the business. There are many examples where Area Managers have placed branch managers in 'problem' branches without preparing them for the issues they will face, or helped or supported them once they have taken up the position. Basically, they throw them in at the deep end and expect them to swim.

A very common issue is when the assistant manager of the branch is turned down for the manager position, even when they have covered the position for a long period.

Very few Area Managers are competent in explaining why an

individual was not appointed and give excuses rather than valid reasons. This results in the new manager having to experience considerable hostility and resentment from not only the assistant manager, but from many of the team also. So why do so many Area Managers not offer support or guidance or dig below the surface looking for performance issues? There are a number of good explanations for this.

Unconscious Competence

It is a proven fact that “good management’ will result in good people staying and not-so-good people either improving or leaving. Where as ‘bad management’ will result in good people leaving and not-so-good people staying and possibly getting even worse.

“Good Manager: good people stay, not so good people leave.

Bad Manager: good people leave, not so good people stay and get worse”.

During their time as branch managers, many Area Managers did not experience too many risky, difficult and complicated people issues. If they did, they often resolved them unconsciously. They just acted as good managers should, which resulted in the issues being resolved quickly. Ask any manager who is competent in performance or behaviour management “how do you do it or what do you do?” and you will probably receive a shrug of the shoulders and a comment like “I don’t know specifically, I just do it” (Unconscious Competence)

Unconscious competence is not acceptable at Area Management level though because it is not transferable. A key requirement of the job is to coach and train branch managers in performance management. Area Managers can only fulfill this critical function if they know exactly what is to be done and how to do it. (Conscious competence)

Conscious Incompetence

Unfortunately, there are some Area Managers who ‘know’ they are not personally competent in dealing with performance and behaviour issues and will go to great lengths not to expose this weakness to others. (Conscious incompetence) These Area Managers tend to encourage branch managers to; not make waves, maintaining the status quo and to tolerate rather than to develop. They certainly do not dig below the surface in a branch seeking ‘people’ issues that may be affecting the business.

One of the most disappointing comments I heard from a seasoned Area Manager when asked why he was not supporting his managers in poor performance management was “I am not allowed to get involved as I am the next step of the appeal process”. Yet doesn’t the Area Managers’ job description include the requirement to develop their managers in the skills of people management’?

A good measure of an Area Managers’ competence in performance management is to simply look at the competence of the branch managers within his/her team. It is pretty certain that if the Area Manager is not competent in performance management, the majority of the

branches within the area will be being run by ‘under performing’ branch managers. Where as with a competent Area Manager, the majority of the branches within the area will be being operated by good branch managers.

Possible Solutions

If a retail organisation needs to tackle performance or behaviour issues at branch management level I believe they need to develop the skills and competence of poor performance management at Area Management level first, as Area Managers alone have the authority and are the biggest influence on branch manager effectiveness.

Unconscious competent area managers need to become consciously competent so they can not only develop others but also develop their own skills in poor performance management further. Conscious incompetent area managers need to admit that they are not effective in performance or behaviour management and be prepared to learn and develop the necessary skills. If they are not prepared to do so then they themselves need to be performance managed by the company.

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