Do Your Performance Management Systems Support Management Performance?

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In working with various clients lately, we're seeing a common problem: Each organization has performance management systems that, as currently designed, create problems. These systems create the types of employee behaviors and unsatisfactory performance the client is trying to eliminate! Each organization is systematically creating and rewarding a workforce that just shows up, keeps their heads down, doesn't take initiative or risks, has gotten comfortable doing what they've always done, and yet they continue to get paid more and more each year!

The following is a definition of Performance Management I appreciate:

Performance management is an ongoing, continuous process of communicating and clarifying job responsibilities, priorities, and performance expectations in order to ensure mutual understanding between a supervisor and employee. Indiana University Dept. of Human Resources

What this definition articulates is the continuous nature of the effort, while ensuring what the supervisor (i.e., management) wants is what the employee knows to deliver. This sounds simple, but it's not.

If your organization is committed to becoming an industry leader, producing great products, or simply increasing customer satisfaction, why do so many of your performance management systems encourage behaviors that don't support your vision and goals? Let me share a few examples:

- If you want your employees to take initiative and be creative, why do you evaluate their performance on their error rates? The lower the error rate, the higher their performance score. That makes no sense. Why not evaluate them on the quality of the solutions and enhancements they identify?

- If you want employees to help solve problems and participate in new projects, why do you allow your managers to rate employees who do just what their position description outlines and nothing else as "Excellent"? Again, that makes no sense. That rating is reinforcing barely acceptable behavior. What's the incentive to perform at a higher level? Why not evaluate them honestly? Just doing your job is "Satisfactory."

- And finally, my favorite: If you want employees to be engaged and realize what they do matters, why do you pay them for coming to work? Why do you pay for perfect attendance? Once again, that makes no sense. They can't do their jobs if they're not at work. Being at work is expected. Acknowledge perfect attendance with a certificate, but why pay for it? You're already paying them to do their jobs!

So the bottom line is: Review your performance management systems. Are they reinforcing the behaviors you want or the ones you're trying to eliminate? Are they supporting management and performance or hurting it?