Let Your People Grow

By Ellen J. Sullivan, MSJ

When Lean consultant Mark Graban goes to a laboratory, he sees people under pressure to produce. More and more tests. Less and less time. People too busy bailing out the boat to inflate the life raft. Whose job is it to inflate the life raft, anyway? Lean, based on Toyota’s process improvement system, would probably say it’s anyone and everyone’s job.

Graban, author of *Lean Hospitals: Improving Quality, Patient Safety, and Employee Satisfaction*, helps hospital and laboratory managers empower their staff to improve the work environment. As Senior Consultant at ValuMetrix Services, he presented the session, “Quick and Effective Ways to Continuously Transform People Development in Your Laboratory,” at The Dark Report’s Executive War College April 29 in New Orleans.

Companies that try to hire the best and brightest people to compensate for bad processes come out no further ahead. For the laboratory, Graban said, a better approach would be to follow the Toyota model of hiring qualified, technical staff and helping
them develop nontechnical skills such as problem-solving, negotiating, communicating, and measuring performance.

One of the biggest mistakes supervisors make is providing all the answers to staff problems, according to Michele L. Best, MASC, MT(ASCP), course instructor for “Performance Management: How to Get Your Employees to Do What You Want,” at the ASCP Leadership Exchange March 20 in Philadelphia. By trying to solve their employees’ problems for them, supervisors hinder the professional development of their employees.

“Getting them to solve their own problems encourages their learning and creativity,” she said. Best is System Director for Clinical Laboratories in the Department of Pathology at Dimensions Healthcare System in Cheverly, Maryland. She is also the ASCP 2009 Lifetime Achievement Award Winner.

An experienced medical technologist in a laboratory that had not yet implemented the Lean system once told Graban that she used to feel like a scientist, but now she feels like a robot: “I move tubes and push a button.” The Lean goals are to engage her scientific background in problem-solving and improving processes, Graban said. So how do you do that? Well, you give her a chance.

One of Graban’s clients had a medical technologist in the microbiology laboratory who was reserved and quiet. Not too unusual. Through the employee’s involvement in the Lean process, her confidence and enthusiasm began to grow. As a result, her supervisor asked her to lead the stand-up shift-change meetings. The supervisor never would have believed it could happen.

According to the Lean system, when people have to think, they develop wisdom, and they develop wisdom when they are put under the right amount of pressure. The manager’s job is to lead by example, teach root cause analysis, and look at every solution as an experiment. If it works, great. If it doesn’t, change it. In other words, encourage anyone to identify problems and propose solutions in a blame-free environment. Problems should not be hidden, but should be identified and seen as opportunities to fix them. In other words, “No problems is a problem.”

Don’t Dictate

If an employee comes to a supervisor with a problem, the supervisor should ask “what” and “how” questions: “What have you done to solve the problem?” “How did that work?” And, “What barriers are in your way?” One should not ask the “why” questions such as, “Why didn’t you try this?” “Your job is to get her to solve her own problem and to say you have confidence in her,” said Best. “You are tempted to give her the answer, but you want her to figure out her own approach.”

Rather than dictating solutions, the supervisor can suggest things that may work, but leave it up to the employee to decide which course of action to take. It’s important for supervisors to be mindful of the reason they delegate a particular task. Is it to help develop an employee’s capability, or to dump a responsibility on someone else?

“Good management is knowing what task to delegate and to whom,” Best said. A medical technologist may know how to run an instrument better than the rest of staff, but may never be good at training others to use it. You do not want to set her up to fail.

Lean guru Norman Bodek says that suggestions are things I want other people to do; ideas are things I can do. Here’s an example of a suggestion Graban came across in a laboratory.

An employee identified a problem: “Pour-off samples have red blood cells in them.” The suggested solution: “Be more careful.” A laboratory leader must treat this suggestion like all suggestions, as a gift. In this case, the leader could say that the problem needs to be more clearly defined and then could request additional ways to solve the problem. Instead of simply rejecting a suggestion, the leader can use it as a starting point for talking with the employee to find a solution that does work.

Here’s an example of an idea. A phlebotomist had trouble communicating with patients, many of whom did not speak English. The phlebotomist noted that other hospital departments had telephones with translation capability. Clear identification of the problem and a practical solution that the phlebotomist could be empowered to implement. Within 24 hours, the phone was installed and working.

In a traditional organization, managers can feel threatened when employees identify problems. Then managers seek to find fault with their staff, creating a poisonous culture. Graban worked with a laboratory in which a stellar medical technologist for years declined opportunities and incentives to be promoted, because he didn’t want to “go over to the dark side.” When laboratory management shifted to a no-blame culture looking to improve processes and focus on the patients, he accepted the supervisor position,” said Graban.
Superstars, Steady Eddies, and Falling Stars

Everyone loves superstar employees, because it’s easy to give them more work and then ignore them. Best said this is a mistake. While it’s good not to micromanage superstars, it’s even more important to recognize their work, not just privately but publicly. She recommends the book 101 Recognition Secrets: Tools for Motivating and Recognizing Today’s Workforce, by Rosalind Jeffries.

Star employees should not only be recognized but also rewarded. Besides monetary rewards, which of course are always welcome, rewards that further employees’ professional growth are equally important. These rewards can include sending employees to special meetings and even offering to fill in for employees while they are away. “Don’t be afraid to go back to the bench for a day,” said Best.

Seventy percent of employees in the United States are doing just enough to keep their jobs. These “steady Eddies” have potential, and it’s the supervisor’s job to get them moving. Meanwhile, falling stars take up 80% of a supervisor’s time. Their performance issues must be addressed through effective performance improvement sessions and corrective action.

An example of a falling star may be someone who refuses to leave the bench to give someone else a helping hand. “If the behavior continues, your staff will think you aren’t doing anything to address it,” Best said. “If the problem is solved or the person leaves the company, staff know you did your job. You don’t need to tell them. Remember, what you permit, you promote.”

Know Their Motivators

DeLisa Simon-Dawkins, CLS(NCA), MLT(ASCP), Director of Minority Health Issues for the Iron Disorders Institute in Greenville, South Carolina, reminds managers to be mindful of the generational characteristics of staff. Generation Y, or “Millennials”—those who were born between the late 1970s and the late 1990s—will have no problem leaving a job if it is not meeting their standards, with or without another job in the queue, she said.

“Impatient for results and motivated by rapid change, they are extremely tech-savvy, and their ability to adapt quickly to changing technology is a great asset,” said Dawkins, who is also a consultant and professional speaker. “It is up to us as managers to maximize that talent through ‘special project’ assignments. I worked with a tech who excelled in troubleshooting instruments. Our manager was wise enough to continue to nurture that talent to aid in long-term retention.”

Generation X—those born in the mid-1960s to 1980—is the generation of independence and ambition, said Dawkins.
“A stiff, rigid environment is not the lifestyle of choice for them. They are motivated by time, flexibility, and the gift of options when dealing with work–life balance. They possess the ability to multitask effectively and without a tremendous amount of effort. Provide them with opportunity for fresh aspects within their job scope and they will flourish. Flexibility is key. It is up to us in leadership to use this as leverage.”

In a previous position, Dawkins managed collection teams for a community blood center, where each team had a leader to communicate concerns to management. “When visiting the blood drives, I would meet with each team leader briefly to determine how I could have a positive impact on their work day,” she said. “What was interesting was that each of the teams had different motivating factors. Some teams were motivated by an extended lunch hour. Other teams were motivated by time—finishing early or coming in later than scheduled—and some enjoyed the simple pleasure of having their lunch delivered. What I learned is that each group of employees is different. Management should take the same steps to identify the motivation within their employees.”

Know Your Biases

Supervisors also need to be aware of their own personal biases. “We all deal with about 20 biases of our own,” she said. “These are things we all have. We have to recognize them and not let them get in the way”—whether they are as egregious as a racial bias or as seemingly benign as a bias against the university a person attended. Nonverbal and verbal communications are equally important. If staff members notice a supervisor jokes and laughs with one group of employees and remains cool and distant with another, bias is suspected and resentments grow. Best advises supervisors to “wear a mask” and demonstrate consistent behavior (including non-verbals) with all staff members.

Good performance management is a mutual, two-way process of open, honest communication, according to Best. A supervisor’s goal should be to help each employee reach his or her individual maximum potential and to improve organizational performance. These goals are accomplished through treating staff members fairly and consistently, rewarding good performance, and dealing effectively with employees who do not meet performance standards.

“The rest of the staff is watching you,” she added. “Your effectiveness as a supervisor depends on your leadership, and leadership requires trust and confidence that you will act in the best interests of those who follow.”

The Lean philosophy is that every employee should have two jobs: (1) do your work, and (2) improve your work. In the laboratory, Graban said, people may complain that their job is mostly to do the work. When the job is done, they go home; if they have a little extra time, they might talk about improvement. But most employees will embrace opportunity, encouragement, and guidance to improve the overall performance of the laboratory, and doing so can be its own reward.

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