

BURNING THE DEADWOOD

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Abstract

This paper will focus on the issue of how to deal with marginal employees, particularly 'deadwood' employees in an organisation. It also seeks to explore how removing deadwood in organisations can improve productivity and quality. Drawing initially on London and Mone's (1993) process of managing marginal employees, specifically those employees who are performing at a bare minimum level because of lack of ability and/or motivation to perform well, it attempts to highlight that the key to effective work performance is not only down to the ability and motivation of employees but also the effective leadership of their bosses.

This paper consists of five parts. Part 1 introduces the concept of an effective worker and deadwood. Part 2 positions my personal appraisal of the current debates surrounding deadwood and details my resolution for the link between leadership and employee effectiveness. Part 3 represents my critique of my own resolution distinguishing the nuts and bolts of its soundness. Finally, Part 4 consists of the conclusion that is derived from the critique of my resolution and also further reflection on the topic.

PART 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview of effective workers and deadwood

There have been profound changes in the extent and nature of work during recent years, which have led to serious discussions particularly on what constitutes an effective worker. Is it enough for a worker to merely wait to be told what to do and never question why things are done a certain way and never appreciate what they are there to do? In other words, are workers these days mere *automatons* programmed to do things in such a habitual manner that they hinder or block any positive changes, particularly in the face of new improved processes? The problem lies with workers who are on cruise control showing little interest in career growth or in making any useful contribution to the organisation. They lack the ability or motivation to be effective in the workplace. They are what we call “deadwood”.

According to London and Mone (1993), marginal employees are those employees who are performing at a bare minimum level because of lack of ability and/or motivation to perform well. Table 1 shows actions for managers to take with four different types of employees. As the table suggests, managers need to take into account whether employees lack ability, motivation, or both in considering ways to improve performance. To determine an employee's level of ability, a manager should consider if he or she has the knowledge, skills and abilities needed to perform effectively. Lack of ability may be an issue if an employee is new or the job has recently changed. To determine employees' levels of motivation, managers need to consider if employees are doing a job they want to do and if they feel they are being appropriately paid or rewarded. A sudden negative change in an employee's performance may be a sign of personal problems.

Employees with high ability and motivation are likely to be good performers (*solid performers*). Table 1 emphasizes that managers should not ignore employees with high ability and high motivation. Managers should provide development opportunities to keep them satisfied and effective. Poor performance resulting from lack of ability but not motivation (*misdirected effort*) may be improved by skill development activities such as training or temporary assignments. Managers with employees who have the ability but lack the motivation (*underutilizers*) need to consider actions that focus on interpersonal problems or incentives. These actions include making sure the incentives or rewards that employees value are linked to performance, and making counselling

available to help employees deal with personal problems or career job dissatisfaction. Chronic poor performance by employees with low ability and motivation (*deadwood*) indicates that outplacement or firing may be the best solution.

		Ability	
		Low	High
Motivation	High	<p>Misdirected effort</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coaching • Frequent performance feedback • Goal setting • Training or temporary assignment for skill development • Restructured job assignment 	<p>Solid performers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reward good performance • Identify development opportunities • Provide honest, direct feedback
	Low	<p>Deadwood</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withholding pay increases • Demotion • Outplacement • Firing • Specific, direct feedback on performance problems 	<p>Underutilizers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give honest, direct feedback • Provide counselling • Use team building and conflict resolution • Link rewards to performance outcomes • Offer training for needed knowledge or skills • Manage stress levels

(Source: Noe et.al (2008). Human Resource Management. p.387. Based on London, M. (1997). Job Feedback, pp: 96-97.)

Table 1 Ways To Manage Employees

1.2 Understanding Deadwood

The problem with ‘deadwood’ employees is that they are not proactive and never on board for rapid change. Because the structure of a typical organization stresses specialization of roles, we have little opportunity to develop well-rounded skills or to develop in areas in which we are weak. Consequently, we are losing our ability to handle change easily and promptly. Humans are creatures of habit and will repeatedly do tasks for which they've been rewarded. When a certain way has worked before – why change? A worker will repeat what he knows and what has worked for him, until he becomes deadwood. He is dysfunctional. He is not performing. He is blocking rather than leading change. Deadwood almost never leave an organization on their own; either they die on the job, they retire or get fired. And when they do leave, they won't be missed. There is no evidence of purposeful activity, no creativity, no integration of people. The causes of deadwood are woven tightly into the structure of the organization. The danger is inherent. If organizations do

not restructure themselves to re-energize, encourage flexibility and adjust the attitudes of deadwood then the crippling of the organization is inevitable.

From Effective to Ineffective Workers

Building from Table 1, an individual's effectiveness in an organisation, from being solid performers to becoming deadwood is determined by their ability at performing their work tasks as well as their motivation to perform them. Azides (2004) concluded that the organizational structures that are based on the bureaucratic, military model, the hierarchy, or the so-called pyramid, are not structured for rapid change. They are linear. They assume that the world is flat. Energy flows only one way – from the top down. And in such clogged structures, deadwood flourishes. Thus, we are vulnerable to corporate cancer – deadwood – which reduces our productivity and profitability. Stanton Marris, in a guest lecture I attended, further emphasized this misdirection of productive energy:

...Einstein's theory of relativity tells us that, in physics, the more mass, the more energy. That should be true of organizations too. In practice, though, the greater energy locked up in large organizations is more likely to be crushed by complex bureaucracy; the 'rules' frustrate, constrain and divert the energy. Policies and procedures introduced to improve efficiency become ends in themselves. People lose sight of what they are there to do. This lack of focus on the real goals of the organizations translates itself to the top team, which becomes frustrated. Things aren't happening to plan, and they aren't happening fast enough. They start talking about 'breakthrough thinking' and 'innovation', but at the same time they push for short-term results and increased productivity. Leaders have to create a climate in which people can use their energies and talents and full stretch towards well-defined goals...

Inevitably, this also signals a gap in effective leadership. A leader needs to be empathetic. If you're going to engage with people, you can't be a cold fish. And people can tell if you're insincere. A leader must be a person who really cares. Our society has been heavily desensitized; we have been programmed to believe "we must never make mistakes" and to adhere to the mantra of "why innovate when the current way works?" And most importantly there is the lingering fear of disrespecting your superior if a subordinate comes up with a better innovative idea, and even worse, when someone else takes credit for your brilliance. What is there to safeguard these workers from being proactive and bold in making positive changes in the workplace? By observation, our society does not offer such safety nets. How often do we face the 'ping pong' effect whenever we need assistance with the administration department officer at any government office? The tactic is always the same: whenever they are too lazy or too preoccupied with other distractions they will send you to another office, and when you reach the other office the same tactic is repeated. Frustrating? Absolutely. Uncommon? Definitely not. Where is the sense of

accountability and responsibility one has for their job, their livelihood? Becker and Huselid (1999) discovered that one of the best strategic rules of HR is that employees have to feel comfortable outside a command-and-control environment. This is achieved by getting them used to risk taking and innovation.

The really successful workers make decisions based on their own values, experience and judgment. And they decide where they stand. The people I find who are not successful are those who look for where to land. They wait and see where the boss is going. Or they wait to see what the prevailing opinion is. Or they defend their position even if they've made a mistake. The confident people have the humility to know when they are to stand their ground no matter where the boss is going. And if it turns out that they're wrong, they also have no problem saying, "I apologize. I will remember that the next time around." It's not about right or wrong. It's about being true to what you know and the value you can add. Sometimes you are going to be right. And sometimes wrong. The only value that you have is what you bring. And to try to pick up the signals from someone else or try to browbeat everyone through the imposition of your opinion to me is the sign of a person who is not a full leader. A full leader has to have humility and courage – both in the same package.

There's no shame or disloyalty implied in wanting to push on, either ASAP or eventually. All workers must have the want or need to develop their careers. Not only is that all right, it should be expected. A boss who thinks his or her employees have no ambition to develop is one who should be concerned.

PART 2

THE LEADERSHIP LINK

2.1 Lead The Change

I wish to explore the rationale that if one leads successfully in many aspects of his/her life then it should also be apparent and the same in his/her work life. But what sets the stars apart from the rest is the knowledge that the key to victory is to learn from their mistakes; not in avoiding falling or failing (Banks, 2004). However, there must exist a climate in the workplace in which the trial mistakes are not career-ending for them, especially for the young and inexperienced. This is what I concluded to be one of the key ingredients to successful employability, which is synonymous with the makings of a great leader. Leaders should live in accordance with their morals and values and have a clear vision of themselves, of others, and the world (Banks, 2004). The road to great leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 1987) that is common to successful leaders is as follows:

- o Challenge the process - First, find a process that a leader believes needs to be improved the most.
- o Inspire a shared vision - Next, share his vision in words that can be understood by the followers.
- o Enable others to act – Provide them the tools and methods to solve the problem.
- o Model the way – As when the process gets tough, get his hands dirty. A boss directs others what to do, a leader shows that it can be done.
- o Encourage the heart - Share the glory with the followers' hearts, while keeping the pains within his own.

If you are not in a position of leadership, the way you lead your life will also translate to your work life and which forces you take a proactive role in making sure you achieve success that the 'wait and see' approach is no longer ideal.

2.2 Be The Blood Not The Disease To The Organisation

Certain work climates are to be blamed for the productivity of its employees. Favouritism, never-ending bureaucratic red-tape and challenges to employee development can strangle productivity. However, if a single employee understands that every unit of employee contribution makes for the

success of the organisation, more employees will start to adjust their attitude. And with luck, a change in attitude for one employee can cause a chain-reaction of more enthusiasm within the organisation. In the end, the organisation must realise that each employee must be constantly reminded of the value they add to the organisation to build the trust and sense of belonging they have for their organisations. This will in turn create loyalty and ultimately a sense of purpose to do the best for their bloodline – their organisation.

PART 3

CRITIQUE OF MY RESOLUTION

3.1 The Way Forward

The growing awareness of the potential danger deadwood poses is, to some extent, prompted by organisations committing themselves to ideas such as empowerment. There is also growing interest in the entire idea of management competencies – the skills that managers will require to manage in future, particularly flexibility and adaptability. When they are actually given the time, resources and support to look at their own development, managers can quickly become excited, realising that there are opportunities rather than obstacles. For many, it is an entirely new experience.

Employee development is an active process involving the individual in decisions about growth and change. It is concerned with attainable realities – the difference between what the individual currently does and how and what she can realistically achieve. It focuses on an attainable and viable role in which the job offers increased challenge, demands and ultimate satisfaction and rewards.

Employee opportunities arise from formal structured learning such as in courses and conferences. But they can also arise from informal unplanned opportunities, self-directed learning and other professional activities such as networking, project management, and work groups. Regular investment of time in learning should be seen as an essential part of professional life, not as an optional extra. More importantly, whilst these experiences can be very valuable, they need to be recognised by individuals and organisations if learning outcomes are to serve further development opportunities and organisational action plans. In this manner, simultaneous improvement in the performance of employees and organisations can be achieved effectively.

3.2 The Hindrance

Indeed, if deadwood employees refuse to evolve into effective employees then serious action must be taken to allow for positive change to occur, such as demotion or even dismissal. It is to be seen as a viable way of improving performance and effectiveness in an organisation. There needs to exist a culture in which it is valued and encouraged. Meanwhile, organisational barriers to transforming these deadwoods into effective workers – such as lack of information and access; lack of coaching and support; lack of real value for learning and lack of reward and recognition - need to be removed. Mayo (1995) asserts that to be better at individual, team and organisational

levels, learning needs to be the key to competitiveness and the achievement of organisational strategy.

PART 4

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Conclusion and Discussion

Employee development enables an individual to gain a competitive advantage over others by consciously propelling himself or herself forward career-wise or self-wise. It means the relentless pursuit of continuous working or doing to better oneself that can lead us to question, “How can I achieve or preserve a good worker status?” or “How can I eliminate or avoid a bad worker status?”

‘Deadwood’ simply indicates that an organisation needs to shape or reshape fast. Employees must now hit the ground running. Without the right initiative and with the lack of productivity, they are more likely to be unsatisfied with their work-life, which leads to higher chances of demotion, and ultimately, termination.

We have already established that deadwoods are like a disease that need to be eradicated from the organisational body. Clear awareness of the toxicity of deadwood must be instilled in the minds of employees to adjust their attitudes towards a positive way of working – a more motivated and fulfilling sense of worth to their organisations. Borrowing the analogy of farming, the withered harmful weeds must be burned and destroyed for new crops to grow. Growth and wealth in the organisation must therefore come from the demise of the unwanted, which ultimately means you are the driver of your own course in working life. It all boils down to the simple tip in life: “If you don’t want to get burned, don’t play with fire.”

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Master's class lecture by Stanton Marris. Lecture notes available at:

<http://www.stantonmarris.com/usr/downloads/articles/leadingwithenergy.pdf>.