Can My Problem Employee Be Saved (or Are They a Lost Cause)?

If I had $5 for every time a senior leader has closed their door and turned to me to vent about their "problem employee" and ask the burning question, *"Can they be saved?"* Essentially, they're asking whether it's a good use of their valuable time to actively try to develop or mentor the person or whether they're essentially a "lost cause". It sounds harsh, but it's not worth pulling out the paddles if the patient is already gone ☹ Indeed, in many cases it makes more sense to acknowledge inappropriate fit and focus on reassignment or other options. Indeed, in many ways the best first question when faced with an underperforming employee is determining whether they likely can in fact turn it around or not.

Whenever a senior leader, project manager or other leader is faced with trying to help a difficult team member address their issues, the focus tends to be on correcting the behavior obviously. Typically, the issue is that they're behaving like "x" and I want them to be more like "y". How can I get them to do that? It's such a simple question, but using a simplistic approach can be a recipe for disaster. In my experience coaching and training teams, I've found that there are three critical factors that impact whether they likely can turn it around – Awareness, Ability, and Motivation. Not only are these three factors determining ones, all three are necessary for sustained performance improvement. If the employee lacks any one, sustained improvement is highly unlikely.

Awareness – Are they aware of the problem? Do they acknowledge improvement areas?
This is such a critical first step that is so often overlooked. The reality is that we don't tend to correct problems that we don't see! You can't assume that they see that their arriving to work late is a problem for example. They might assume that flextime permits shortened tours of duty at will, rationalize that as long as they're completing their work it doesn't matter, notice others arriving around the same time and assume that it's fine, etc. To make matters worse so many leaders sugar coat feedback so much that they fail to point out problem behaviors so they're not brought to the employee's attention oftentimes. There is a reason why 12 step programs start with the individual acknowledging the problem – you will never fix what you don't acknowledge.

So, the first key question is…do they see this as a problem? Note that their sitting and nodding as you discuss the problem from your perspective is NOT necessarily a true acknowledgement of the problem. Until and unless they sincerely acknowledge that they have a problem (with timeliness for example), true behavior changes are unlikely.

To help create awareness…
- ➤ Explain why the behavior is a problem and share the impacts/consequences of their behavior
- ➤ Consider using a 360 feedback type instrument to provide them input from several sources so that they see the problem as a true issue identified by several stakeholders

➢ Ask them to self evaluate areas of strength and potential improvement areas
➢ Provide hard metrics if available

Ability – Do they have the skills/ability to correct the behavior/build the skill set?
This is probably the most obvious factor that leaders focus on with problem employees. Once an individual has acknowledged a problem area, the next obvious question is *"Can they improve it"?* Although it may not be politically correct to admit it, we <u>all</u> have limitations. I'm fully aware of my physical limitations and no matter how much I practice, I will most likely never become a professional ballet dancer. That's just a fact. Fortunately, most workplace goals are much more achievable, but it's still prudent to consider a person's natural strengths/weaknesses and determine the likely aptitude to change behavior or improve a skill area. I recall a year end appraisal review session with one of my first managers in my early 20s. He'd handed me a document listing my areas of strength and weakness from his perspective, and I immediately zoned in on the areas of weakness. As I probed to get additional input from him (truly seeking to learn more), he told me something that I never forgot. *"You should acknowledge your areas of weakness and try to make incremental improvements certainly, but you will always have those areas where you're not as strong. Don't focus all your energy there – instead, find ways to leverage and expand on your natural strengths. That's where you'll really shine!"* Now, this could be dangerous advice depending on the individual and their specific strengths/weaknesses. The comment wasn't intended to excuse poor behavior or discourage skill building, but it does acknowledge that the easiest path to sustained improvement is learning to build on and expand areas of strength. Someone who is a great writer/communicator may not be terribly technically proficient. If their technical limitations are problematic, they should truly consider what level of technical competency is needed and whether that level of improvement realistic for them. For me, I can learn Wordpress basics, but I won't be coding html anytime soon. I work with some leaders who are very analytical and structured but lack key social/relationship skills which has limited their success. While they should acknowledge this and continue to build those skills, they will most likely never become the social magnate they might like (just by virtue of their personality/style). I feel that some of the best, most mature leaders have a keen understanding of where/how much they can likely improve and also look for creative ways to address skill gaps that they likely can't close easily.

To help enhance ability…
➢ Provide a mentor
➢ Provide training
➢ Delegate a small task and coach throughout or provide opportunities to "practice" skills in a safe environment
➢ Provide specific measurable expectations
➢ Provide examples of "best practices" where possible

Motivation – Do they *want* to change?

If the person has awareness of their problem areas and the ability to improve, it's all for naught if they're not sufficiently motivated. We all know individuals whether they're a team member, friend, or family member whose only real challenge is motivation. They *could* change or improve, but they just *won't*. Possibly they don't think it's worth the effort, don't see what's in it for them, are lazy, fear failing, haven't experienced negative consequences, etc. Indeed, if a person is not sufficiently motivated, they most likely won't take the necessary steps to make significant changes. So, it's not enough to be aware of the issue and able to improve, the final key question is are they motivated to change?

To help address motivation issues…

➢ Figure out what is most motivating for that individual and customize your motivation techniques to fit their needs

➢ Clearly spell out potential benefits of making improvements or consequences of not making improvements

Of course, leaders should always consult Human Resources for guidance on performance management issues, and strive to develop and coach all employees to their fullest potential - even problem ones ☺ But, it's so helpful to remember these three simple questions when trying to determine whether an underperforming employee can truly improve.

1. Are they fully aware of the deficiency?
2. Do they have the ability to improve?
3. Are they sufficiently motivated to improve?

Awareness – Ability – Motivation. These are indeed the three legs of the performance management stool. All are equally important to provide long term support for sustained improved individual performance.

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