



ANALYZING AND ADDRESSING PEOPLE ISSUES

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YOUR TEAM EXPECTS YOU TO MAKE JOB-RELATED DECISIONS. THREE SIMPLE IDEAS WILL HELP YOU SUCCEED.

LONG before FMLA and ADA, Henry Ford complained that employees make business more complicated because they bring their problems, opinions, and life experiences to work. Henry had a point. As a modern day manager, you know that managing people issues is an important part of your job. You know that simple situations all too frequently become predicaments that consume your time and test your patience.

PEOPLE issues come in many forms. One might involve two employees not wanting to work together. Another might be a team frustrated with the leadership style of their manager. Still another could involve three members of a five-person team needing FMLA leave at the same time. Each one seems unique; some seem overwhelming. Your success in dealing with them depends on your ability to base your actions, behaviors, and decisions on three ideas:

- Work,
- Policies, and
- Environment.

MANAGING WORK involves defining end-result performance

expectations and coaching your team toward achieving them. It involves using job-related criteria to hire and supervise staff. It involves managing performance with a goal of creating opportunities for success.

MANAGING POLICIES involves helping people work within the value system of the organization. It requires consistent application of corporate policies. It often requires setting aside personal preferences in favor of established guidelines.

MANAGING THE ENVIRONMENT involves creating a workplace that is safe, respectful, and productive. It includes assuring that the culture values collaboration and teamwork.

AMANDA listens carefully as Raghuthama explains that his father, who lives in a distant city, has taken ill. He needs time away from work to support his family.

IN an instant, Amanda faces a management dilemma. Her first reaction may be concern for Raghuthama's father and family. It may be frustration over yet another employee needing a leave of absence in the midst of an important project. Once the initial impact passes, Amanda must answer three questions:

ONE: Does this situation affect work? Yes. Someone will have to carry Raghuthama's workload during his absence.

TWO: Does this situation involve a policy? Yes. The corporate leave policy and applicable laws will guide how Amanda handles it.

THREE: Does this situation affect the workplace environment? Yes. Amanda must consider the effect of Raghuthama's absence on morale, relationships, and productivity.

STEPHANIE was optimistic when she hired Joe. It did not last long. He is bitter about what he believes are unkept promises from the recruitment process. He believes his co-workers are incompetent and that Stephanie is an ineffective leader. Stephanie frequently finds herself in circular discussions with Joe. None of them add to the productivity or success of her team.

IS THIS SITUATION AFFECTING WORK? Yes. It diverts valuable time away from key projects. Joe's productivity is lower than expected. Stephanie has less time for her other direct reports.

IS A POLICY INVOLVED? Yes. The employer makes job offers according to an established procedure. Joe's concerns raise questions about whether his job-offer complied with HR policies.

DOES THIS SITUATION AFFECT THE WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENT? Yes. These issues taint every interaction between Stephanie and Joe. It adds tension to team meetings.

**PEOPLE ISSUES
FREQUENTLY CREATE
FRUSTRATION FOR A
WORKPLACE LEADER. IN
NEARLY EVERY CASE,
RETHINKING THE SITUATION
THROUGH THE LENSE OF
WORK, POLICIES, AND THE
WORKPLACE
ENVIRONMENT PROVIDES A
PATH TO A SOLUTION.**

THE circumstances of an employee issue often divert your attention from the three pillars of work, policy, and environment. A difficult relationship between two employees becomes a personality conflict instead of a work productivity issue; a leave request becomes an attempt to take advantage of the system instead of a policy question; repeated incidents of not wearing personal protective equipment becomes a problem of cooperation rather than a safe work environment issue. When the focus shifts from work, policy, and environment, you lose control of the situation. You become the problem. The employee, or worse, your team, questions your ability to lead, manage, and supervise. They do not talk about how you find solutions and lead them to success. They talk about you being unfair, inconsistent, or biased. It is very difficult for you to regain their confidence when this shift takes place.

AMANDA and Stephanie face the same challenge. They must guard against any personal frustration detracting from their effort to address work, policy, and environment issues. Instead they must carefully analyze their situation to develop an action plan that maintains productivity, assures compliance with applicable policies, and maintains a respectful, productive workplace environment.

AMANDA'S plan must honor Raghuthama's right to take a leave of absence. It must redistribute or reassign his workload, and enable her team to achieve its goals.

STEPHANIE'S plan must address Joe's concerns about the recruitment process. It must create an opportunity for him to meet her performance expectations. It must keep Joe's issues from creating a negative working environment for her team.

**EVERY WORKPLACE
LEADER SHOULD KEEP AN
IMAGINARY HELICOPTER
OUTSIDE OF THEIR OFFICE.
HE OR SHE SHOULD USE IT
TO GET ABOVE THE
TURMOIL OF A SPECIFIC
SITUATION TO FIND THE
CORE WORK, POLICY, AND
ENVIRONMENT ISSUES THEY
NEED TO ADDRESS.**

IN your role as a workplace leader, you must recognize when extraneous issues blur your focus on work, policy, and environment issues. Warning signs include:

- Talking more about the person than how to get the work done
- Blaming an employee for challenges created by their use of an employer policy
- Accepting excuses for behavior that takes away from productivity, respect, or safety.

IT helps to have someone talk you through complex situations. Just as athletes depend on a coach to help them find bad habits or try new approaches, you need someone to ask you questions that help you "objectify" difficult employee questions and situations. You should ask your manager, an HR professional, an OD expert, or a mentor to help you get above the

fray long enough to see job-related issues and plan to address them.

INTERESTINGLY, when you use work, policy, and environment to analyze people issues, a "common goal" emerges. It leads you to a solution that works for you, the employee, and the organization. One manager, for example, found that talking to an employee about tardiness (policy) created friction. When she reframed the issue around the importance of being available to customers (work), the employee was much more willing to cooperate. A CEO reframed a personality conflict between two executives as a job duty (work) – "I hired the two of you to work together, not to constantly fight. Your success depends on your ability to collaborate." The dynamics of the relationship changed quickly. When a plant floor supervisor reframed an employee preference discussion (e.g., "People don't like to wear safety glasses") into a safe work environment discussion, violations decreased significantly.

**CREATE A SIMPLE TOOL TO
REMINDE YOU TO FOCUS ON
THESE THREE IDEAS.**

WRITE three words on 3x5 card:

Work
Policy
Environment

Keep the card on your desk. Take it with you when you go to meetings. Look at it frequently. Use it to analyze people issues. Use it to develop a plan that keeps everyone focused on minimizing disruption and maximizing productivity. Most importantly, use it to remind yourself to manage people in a consistent, fair manner. You and your team will benefit from your new focus.

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