

MAXIMIZING HUMAN POTENTIAL



Tips to Foster Personal Effectiveness

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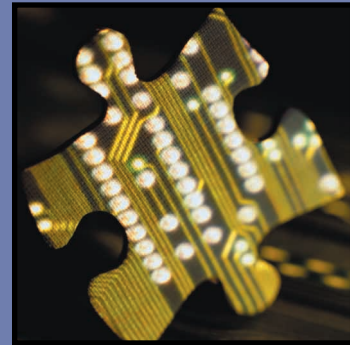
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CAPITAL



TECHNOLOGY

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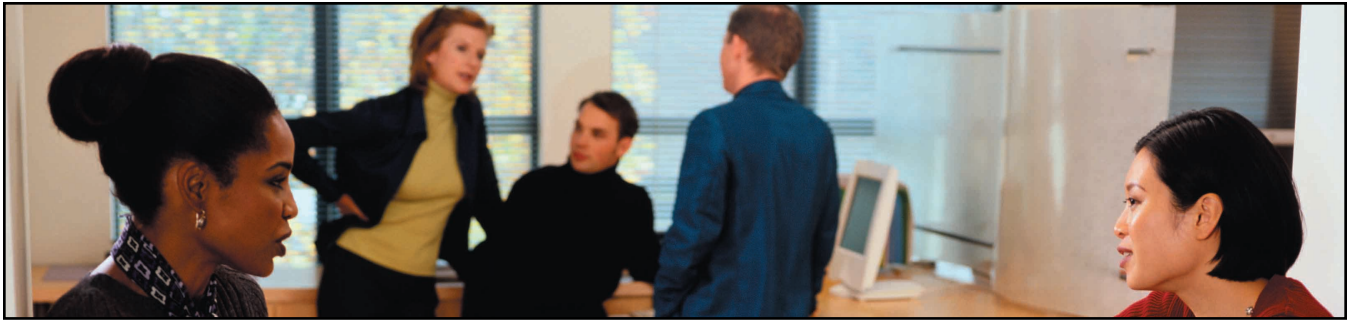


There are essentially three types of assets all companies draw on in order to succeed: people, capital, and technology. All valuable, but people are the critical component to success. They drive capital growth and technical expansion, or at least they should. The truth is, a company's workforce needs care and attention to stay effective and consistently perform at a high level. In fact, employee performance hinges on the concept of "personal effectiveness"—the sum total of the skills, attributes, and abilities necessary for success in a given work environment. If employers can help employees maximize their personal effectiveness and success, it then follows that companies would stand to gain as well. Increasing an employee's personal effectiveness may sound like an area of self-improvement outside the limits of an employer's worry, but the truth is that people who have it together personally tend to insist on the same from themselves professionally. But where does an employer begin with such a task?



Many employers follow through on offering the appropriate training and education for employees to increase their personal effectiveness. They also offer perks like flexible work hours now more than ever. However what employees need above all is the right organizational climate. Such a climate can be defined as the overall mood of the organization, the attitude, the way performance is perceived, evaluated, and rewarded.

Effective, productive climates are *established* when employers set clear expectations, starting the first day an employer goes to work. Such climates are *maintained* when these employers reinforce behavior that works and redirect behavior that doesn't work. This article offers employers ten tips on helping employees maximize their personal effectiveness and, in turn, the effectiveness of their organizations.



1. Improve self-awareness

Ask a thousand different people from a thousand different professions to rate their job performance, and undoubtedly a large percentage of them would overstate their responses. Indeed, most would say without hesitation that they perform at 100 percent of their potential and give 100 percent to their work, even if it's not true.

There are two basic reasons for this: The first and most obvious reason is that people just don't like to acknowledge their own shortcomings; the second (and more common) reason is that they actually believe what they're saying is true. They believe they are operating at 100 percent of their potential, regardless of what the reality of the situation may be.

When people are convinced that they perform at the top of their game, they're actually less likely to improve. That's because they believe that meaningful growth and change are considered unnecessary. Left unchecked, the disparity between perceived performance and actual performance could cause the productivity of individual employees, and eventually the entire company, to become stagnant.

That is why improving self-awareness is perhaps the most important step employees must take to increase their personal effectiveness. Self-awareness is not only an understanding of who a person is and what the person is about, but also of how this information fits into the company's bigger picture. Employees who are aware of their abilities and motivations make informed decisions that benefit both themselves and the company as a whole

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Being self-aware implies an acknowledgement of the good as well as the bad. For example, employees with a high degree of awareness still have shortcomings, but they are aware of them and are able to take conscious steps to fix them. Employees with a high degree of awareness still make mistakes, but they're able to analyze them and draw valuable lessons from the experience. Being self-aware is the human equivalent of having good data—it allows an individual to see and identify the problem as well as the possible solutions.

Employers can help employees become more self-aware using many different exercises, which include:

- Formal performance evaluations,
- 360-degree feedback mechanisms, and
- Opportunities for continuing education.

The bottom line is that self-awareness is an absolutely essential ingredient for growth and development. Until employees understand what drives their own choices and behaviors, they will be powerless to effect any kind of beneficial change in themselves. Trying to change what isn't understood in the first place is a fruitless endeavor at the best, and a disastrous one at worst.

2. Live by values

Values are a very important part of who each employee is. Yet, most people don't give their core-value system much thought—it's simply there and always has been. However, values influence virtually every choice and decision that employees make, from what to do on Saturday night to their professional goals. Simply put, values define what is important and what is considered worthwhile.

Values are the cumulative result of many different factors. Parents are one of the earliest and most influential of these. Other influences include siblings, culture,



teachers, and geographical location, each of which influences the development of a value system in slightly different ways. Although values can certainly change through adulthood, most people end up retaining and following the values they developed early in life.

Values are particularly important within the context of employees' personal effectiveness because they are the driving force behind their behaviors and choices. In fact, understanding the role of these values in their professional lives is a key step toward their improved self-awareness—it helps employees discover the “why” behind the choices they make and helps them evaluate whether these choices are serving their best interests.

For example, employees who greatly value approval may (out of fear of contradicting someone) fall into the habit of remaining silent during meetings, even if they have something worthwhile to contribute. Those who value security may hesitate to go outside the box and take professional risks, choosing instead to stay in a familiar and safe role. In both cases, values would be driving counterproductive behaviors.

In order to be a positive force, values must drive positive choices and behavior, which also must be in agreement with one another. For example, employees who value cooperation as well as competition may find themselves struggling with choices and behaviors that run contrary to one another. Likewise, those who value recognition but never receive it will derive far less meaning from their work than they would otherwise. The net result is an employee who feels frustrated, unfulfilled, and unsatisfied—often without even knowing why. When values are in sync with choices being made, professional relationships tend to be stronger and work more productive and fulfilling.

The primary role of an employer in helping an employee this way revolves around expectations. Employees

shouldn't have to play as many guessing games as they do. Instead, clue new employees in on the culture of the organization and its unwritten code of conduct. Then make it very clear what is expected of them in terms of living up to their job descriptions. Cover it all now and limit future surprises. Employers across the country miss the boat by not laying the appropriate groundwork with new hires.

3. Strengthen communication skills

The act of communication is so basic and fundamental that most people don't give it much thought. Communication happens all day, every day, and in every corner of the globe. Unfortunately, much of it is ineffective.

Contrary to popular belief, effective communication is much more than simply saying what you mean and meaning what you say. It is actually a balanced mixture of dialogue and questions, of speaking and listening.

Asking the right questions helps to gather information and avoid misunderstandings. Unfortunately, many people avoid asking questions because they think questions are perceived as a sign of ignorance or stupidity. For example, high-powered, low-patience supervisors often intimidate employees and, as a result, discourage them from asking the questions needed to complete a particular project. This lack of questioning is sure to leave certain matters unclear and lead to faulty assumptions. In the end, supervisors get angry because jobs aren't done to their satisfaction.

Effective communication doesn't begin and end with the ability to relay correct information. The ability to listen and ask questions when appropriate ensures that all parties are on the same page and allows communication to proceed more smoothly. Helping employees master communication skills will improve their overall performance and ultimately their value to the team.

One way to help employee communication skills is by assigning key responsibilities at regular staff meetings. By handing employees the task of reporting on a given area in the company—and doing so regularly—they will eventually become good at doing it and take pride in it.

4. Think strategically

It is sometimes difficult for employees to stay mindful of the big picture—of how their individual talents, activities, and contributions are fitting into the overall strategy of the company. This is particularly true for employees who are in positions that are far removed from those in which higher-level decisions are made. Indeed, for many employees, their workdays begin and end within the limited sphere to which they've grown accustomed, and little thought is given to what the company is doing on a larger scale.

This type of disconnection can breed apathy and a “who cares” attitude that will ultimately affect work quality and spread to others. After all, when work is being done in a perfunctory style (and primarily for the sake of next week's paycheck), it is bound to become less meaningful and less fulfilling to the employee doing it. But keeping staff connected to the company's larger strategic picture causes them to be more mindful of the strategic value of their own daily activities. Rather than doing as little as possible to get a job done,

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such employees will find themselves asking, “How can this job be done best in order to benefit the company's overall goals?” Employees who think strategically will increase their personal effectiveness and turn out higher-quality work. Employers can make sure this happens by creating a climate where strategic thinking is valued. Ideas include:

- Involvement in department decisions;
- Incentive plans that motivate employees to offer suggestions to help save money and promote efficiency;
- Mentor-mentee programs that offer employees the opportunity to work with someone higher up;
- Company newsletters that help maintain a steady stream of information;
- Annual reports; and
- Frequent web site updates.

5. Build relationships

The ability to build and sustain professional relationships is a vital component for employees' personal effectiveness. All relationships are based on trust, and trust is created using the same skill sets needed for personal effectiveness. These skills include assertiveness, the ability to communicate clearly and professionally, and the ability to understand (and make appropriate use of) the gifts that each employee brings to his or her job and the rest of the organization.

A formal mentor-mentee program can play an important role in this process. Mentors can help to guide careers and offer solutions to tough situations. The most effective mentors are effective communicators who know when to talk and when to listen and who can communicate what *needs* to be heard rather than what people *want* to hear. They help employees stay grounded and provide sound, unemotional advice when the need arises.

Developing this type of program ties back to the idea of creating an organizational climate. For example, department managers who badmouth others instantly remove trust from the department. If employers “walk the talk,” employees often follow their lead. Relationship building begins with trust. Employers who model trustworthy behavior don't betray an employee's confidence, nor do they participate in sarcastic comments or divulge personal information.



6. Listen with understanding

Although communication is typically thought of as relaying information, it also involves receiving information. Listening is just as important as speaking. When one or both parties stop listening, true communication doesn't take place. This breakdown is usually due to one or more "fatal listening flaws"—mistakes that are usually made unintentionally but that still serve to understand the communication process. These mistakes include:

- **Giving advice.** Doling out advice is a natural human tendency. Unfortunately, it's not always necessary or appropriate. Example: an employee tells a colleague about an unfair performance review that they just received. The colleague immediately launches into a diatribe about what the individual should do to remedy the situation. This isn't listening. In fact, when relating stories, events, or circumstances, some people just want to be acknowledged and heard. They don't want advice. If advice isn't what the person wants, the communication process may shut down entirely.
- **Defensiveness.** Becoming defensive is also a natural human tendency, but one which serves as a barrier to both listening and communication. By assuming a defensive posture, listening becomes almost impossible, as one side of the exchange is effectively closed off. Defensiveness is a common problem when the exchange involves any kind of criticism. Even if the criticism is fair or honest, the employee may feel threatened by it and respond defensively.
- **One-upmanship.** Another way to undermine the listening/communication process is to constantly "one-up" what the other person is saying. In the context of the performance-review example, this might mean making a comment such as, "Oh, you think your review was unfair? Wait till you hear what happened to me!" This kind of response isn't listening. It is self centered, interrupting, and an attempt to take control of the situation.
- **Telling others how to feel.** Effective listening implies an ability to understand and appreciate what other people are feeling. On the other hand, telling other people how to feel ("Oh, don't worry about that, it's just a single review") discounts and multiplies their feelings. It implies that they are

wrong for feeling the way they do and quickly closes whatever channel of communication might have been open.

One creative way to build organizational listening skills is to hold small group meetings to ask how listening can be improved in general. Gather insight from small groups of employees about whom the worst abusers are and gather information about how to change the listening culture.

7. Use assertive language

Clarity is an essential component of effective communication, especially for management, as they are constantly delegating projects and tasks. After all, if the message isn't clear, it can't be understood.

One of the best ways of achieving clarity is through the use of assertive language—saying what you mean and meaning what you say. For example, calmly informing an employee that a meeting must be limited to 30 minutes is assertive. It clearly relays information and sets definite time parameters.

Assertiveness is often confused with aggressiveness, although they are entirely different styles of communication. Aggressive communication tends to be unclear because it is emotionally charged and often irrational. In the context of the previous example, aggressive communication would be failing to inform the employee of the time constraint and then becoming upset and blaming the individual when the meeting runs longer than 30 minutes. Rather than laying out information calmly and clearly, aggressive communication blurts it out in an emotional, reactive way.

Being able to communicate assertively is a worthy goal for all employees, and it's worthwhile for management to make sure they learn the proper techniques. Whether their positions are considered communication-intensive (involving sales, for example) or more solitary (such as running the company's back-office operations), assertive communication will increase employees' personal effectiveness and make them better at what they do.

Employers who create the appropriate climate for assertiveness tend to model the behavior they are very often likely to see back.



8. Focus on strengths

While focusing on individual strengths may seem like common sense, it certainly doesn't seem to be common knowledge. Instead, many employees tend to focus on what is most convenient or easiest. Although it's usually done subconsciously, they're making choices for reasons other than where their strengths lie. This mismatch can lead to dissatisfaction and a lack of fulfillment.

For example, let's assume an employee is very skilled at dealing with people. He loves to talk, interact, and make new acquaintances. Will he be happy maintaining the company's computer systems on the graveyard shift? Would such a position allow him to take advantage of his greatest strengths and abilities? Obviously not. But if he did in fact work in that ill-suited position for the last ten years, it wouldn't have been by mere coincidence—it would have been the result of choices that employee made based on factors other than his strengths. Perhaps the more solitary position paid more, or offered better insurance benefits, or perhaps he just felt more comfortable not putting himself in a position where his true strengths would be tested. When employees make the choice to focus on their personal strengths, they'll find it is key to building and increasing personal effectiveness.

Helping staff members capitalize on their strengths can be done through consistent performance evaluations that focus on skill building. Although these evaluations typically focus on an employee's weaker areas, employees also need to know where their strengths lie in order to maximize them.

9. Set smart goals

Goals provide direction and a future destination that gives meaning to whatever is being done in the here and now. However, all goals are not created equal. Some are pointless and wasteful; others can be downright harmful. So what are the attributes of "smart" goals?

- **Specific.** As the purpose of any goal is to provide a target to shoot for, it isn't much good if the target is obscure or indistinct. For example, if an employee resolves to 'be more productive at work,' that isn't a smart goal—it's too general. A better strategy would be to determine the individual's next level or position and then work with her to set specific goals that will help take her there.
- **Measurable and achievable.** Attempting to reach a goal that isn't measurable is like trying to climb a mountain with a blindfold on. If it can't be measured, it can't be achieved.
- **Realistic and timely.** Lofty, ambitious goals are desirable; goals so lofty they cannot be reached set individuals up for failure. Better goals are those that establish realistic expectations with realistic time frames.

Employers can assist employees in setting goals—as long as they are professional goals. Unfortunately, this is another shortcoming of today's typical performance evaluation.

Working with employees to set goals about their performance or education is a healthy introduction to a process they'll come to find works in all areas of life.

10. Be accountable

All individuals are accountable for their own behavior. When people hold themselves accountable for their actions, they are better able to understand their responsibility in making decisions and choices. For example, when individuals realize they are not where they want to be professionally, they must also recognize that their choices and actions are responsible for the situation.

Accountability allows people to objectively analyze and, if necessary, modify their choices and behaviors. After all, if they're constantly able to lay the blame at someone else's feet every time something goes wrong, what possible reason or incentive is there for positive change? If they are only helpless victims of circumstance every time something negative happens, how can they ever hope to improve their situations?

Employers honor accountability by creating a climate where ownership is valued, where it's not a crime to admit when you're wrong and, in fact, it's frowned on far more to blame others. Another smart move is to create an environment where people's words are the same as their actions. Such a place begins with management setting the examples.

Maximizing Human Potential

Maximizing personal effectiveness requires an understanding of the forces behind it—an understanding of individual values, choices, and behaviors. This understanding enables people to know where they are, why they are there, and, more importantly, where they are going.

The ancient Roman philosopher Marcus Aurelius wrote, "Our lives are what our thoughts make of them." Becoming self aware and self-directed enables people to make choices that are in concert with their goals and values—choices that will ultimately make them more effective, more productive, and more fulfilled. Only by maximizing personal effectiveness can one's true potential be realized.



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