

Employee goal setting: Strategies for the year ahead

Does the annual act of setting employee performance goals for the upcoming year generate more than a few groans from your staff? While some employees take the process seriously, others balk at the activity as “a waste of time” or “administrative garbage.” They whip something off and quickly forget what they even wrote down, which doesn’t benefit anyone.

So how can managers improve the odds of team members thoughtfully formulating goals and doing their best to reach them? Consider these strategies:

Make it personal

Workers sometimes concoct goals they believe will please their boss in order to check off the task and move on. And while the rhetoric may be good, the likelihood of substantial follow-through is low. Aim instead to encourage goals with personal significance.

“Most managers start with what they want: ‘Joe, by the end of next week, I need your goals for 2019,’” says Michael Wilkinson, managing director of Leadership Strategies, Inc. “Instead, start with what the employee wants: ‘Joe, what would make you especially proud to be able to say you accomplished by the end 2019?’ Then ask, ‘What would be the evidence that would demonstrate that this was true?’”

Helen Godfrey of The Authentic Path suggests sitting down and brainstorming with each employee. “Find out his/her interests and motivations. What does he/she enjoy doing? Is there something he/she would like to do more of at work? This could be a great starting point to flesh out some goals around these interests. Partnering with the employee to fine-tune his/her goals can foster goodwill and a sense of belonging to the team.”

Provide ongoing support

All talk and no action discourages workers from buying into goal setting, so management needs to assist in turning aspirations into reality. Consider a professional development budget for each individual to use toward educational objectives, membership dues or travel expenses. Carve out workday time for learning new skills or reading relevant material. Giving people the means to succeed creates the expectation of serious results rather than lofty ambitions.

Support also includes building an environment where goals exist beyond a file folder. When revisited and evaluated regularly, they become more than just words.

“To establish and accomplish goals, employees want frequent, ongoing feedback—conversations/coaching with their manager, open communication all year, no surprises,” says Robert Morlot, managing partner of Clearwater Business Advisers.

Eliminate fear

Disheartened by employees submitting lackluster goals? Instead of chastising as unambitious, consider possible reasons behind setting the bar low:

- The employee already feels overworked and is hesitant to take on more.
- Accomplishment affects one's performance review, so the person wants to ensure goals can be reached easily.
- The company offers an incentive for fulfilling goals, so why take a chance on losing out?

Again, managerial support becomes a key factor. Create a practical plan together for how challenging goals can exist alongside current responsibilities. Assure people they won't be penalized for aiming high. Set regular check-ins to re-evaluate specifics and make adjustments.

Watch, too, that people aren't frightened by jargon. Some high performers simply do not respond well to approaching work with a formal eye-on-the-prize mentality.

"They don't think with a goal mindset. The journey is much more engaging than the destination," says behavioral analyst and coach Connelly Hayward. He notes that these workers respond better to descriptive and subjective preferred outcomes instead of objective goals, so let them describe their ideal outcome in whatever way works best for them.

"In check-in sessions, the manager should ask 'Are you moving closer or further away from X?' followed up with, 'What do you think/feel is causing that?' The manager can focus on the outcome without using goal terminology," Hayward says.

Lead by example

Finally, demonstrate your belief that goal setting is a worthwhile company activity by taking part yourself. Let your team know you'll be creating goals, too; you may even wish to mention a few from your list.

Then, throughout the year, share success stories about accomplishment as well as obstacles to fulfillment. As employees see that goals are an ongoing part of work life, their attitude may become one of respect rather than dread.