

Ineffective Management Practices Linked to Social Skills

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A recent study published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* may have uncovered a critical missing piece of the puzzle when trying to explain why highly motivated personnel become problem employees. Nationally recognized experts have addressed different aspects of under performing employees. Factors believed to contribute to the deterioration of employee behavior, attitude and performance include physical work environment, quality of supervision and leadership, personality types, generational issues, effective communication skills, ethical and integrity issues, and implications of written policy.

As relevant as these explanations are, no single explanation has been able to pinpoint the elusive combination of factors that contribute to the widespread transition of caring, motivated people into under performing employees. The question has been why many employees become ineffective despite background checks, interviews, polygraph test and psychological evaluations. Why many employees become ineffective regardless of training, supervision, standard operating procedures and policies? Despite the enthusiasm, high level of commitment and desire to make a difference in their organizations, why do such a large percentage of these individuals become under performers? Why can't we as professionals get a handle on this situation? What are we overlooking?

One of the problems hindering efforts toward identifying and addressing the issue of young problem employees is in part over confusion concerning the difference between conscientiousness and social skills. During numerous discussions with administrators, poor social skills were described as being synonymous with a lack of conscientiousness toward their career. In statistics, this problem is known as multicollinearity. Multicollinearity occurs when two variables, such as social skills and conscientiousness, are highly correlated and can serve as proxies for each other to predict job performance. Recent research findings suggest that conscientiousness and social skills are in fact two separate and distinct variables that impact the quality of job performance (Witt & Ferris, 2003).

In the study, conscientiousness is described as the will to achieve (Digman & Takemoto-Chock, 1981). "Industrious and achievement-oriented workers high in conscientiousness are generally successful because they are willing to put forth the level of effort needed to accomplish goals, that is, they are motivated to perform well (Mount & Barrick, 1995a). Conscientious workers tend to be efficient, planful, thorough, responsible, organized, reliable, self-disciplined, more proactive and effective in goal-setting and exhibited stronger job dedication and perseverance (McCrae & John, 1992).

Social skills are described as the ability to understand the feelings, thoughts and behaviors of persons, including oneself, in interpersonal situations and to act appropriately upon that understanding (Marlowe, 1986). Another description of social skills involves reflecting on both interpersonal perceptiveness and the capacity to adjust one's behavior to different and changing situational demands and to effectively influence and control the responses of others (Witt & Ferris, 2003). When discussing the concept of social skills, the definition of skill must be considered. Skill is synonymous with proficiency, to denote the degree of mastery already acquired in an activity (Super &

Crites, 1962). Therefore, by definition, social skill reflects ability (Riggio, 1986; Topping, Bremner, & Holmes, 2000) and is learned (Gesten, Weissberg, amish, & Smigh, 1987).

Personality traits and social skills are different. Social skills have a greater influence on job performance than does personality traits (Leary, 1995). Strong social skills have a facilitating effect that accentuates positive personality traits and increases job performance. Low social skills combined with certain personality traits could actually contribute to decreased job performance (Witt & Ferris, 2003). Personality traits that are predictive of job performance are agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, extraversion and openness to experience (Goldberg, 1992).

Conscientiousness is the strongest individual difference predictor of overall job performance, with the exception of general mental ability (e.g., Behling, 1998; Dunn, Mount, Barrick, & Ones, 1995; Hogan, Rybicki, Motowidlo, & Borman, 1998). However, as far as personality traits are concerned, conscientiousness is the most consistent predictor of job performance (e.g., Behling, 1998; Dunn, Mount, Barrick, & Ones, 1995; Hogan, Rybicki, Motowidlo, & Borman, 1998). The resulting characteristics of conscientiousness include dependability, thoroughness, socially prescribed impulse control that facilitates task and *goal-directed behavior*. *Goal-directed behavior* includes thinking before acting, delaying gratification, following norms and rules, planning, organizing and prioritizing tasks (John & Srivastava, 1999). It should be noted that some of the characteristics of *goal-directed behaviors* are also basic management functions.

When discussing less productive employees, job performance is clearly one of the issues having a direct impact on the organization. Research suggests that job performance is obviously impacted by the employee's level of motivation and ability to perform core job task. When either ability or motivation is absent, performance is near zero (Witt & Ferris, 2003). In fact, motivation has stronger effects on workers performance when they possess higher levels of ability (Witt & Ferris, 2003). And ability has a stronger effect on job performance the more motivated the worker (Witt & Ferris, 2003). However, a highly motivated employee without the ability and skills to do the job results in poor job performance (Witt & Ferris, 2003). Ironically, the business profession fully understands this dynamic and addresses this issue with standard operating procedures. For example, an eager young associate responding to a customer service request that has not received training in dealing with customer service problems. Because that employee has not developed his customer service skills so as to become proficient in handling customer complaints under difficult situations, they lose a customer. This is clearly an example of poor job performance by a motivated, but unskilled employee.

Operations training, task development, use of equipment, safety regulations are other examples of important job skills that can result in serious consequences when motivated personnel are untrained. The need to train highly motivated employees in job skills related to high risk situations has been clearly identified and addressed in the business field through training, written policy and standard operating procedures. The civil liability involving core job skills have been extensively addressed and clearly established by the courts.

According to a recent study, the same dynamic occurs with conscientious employees and social skills. A conscientious employee with underdeveloped social skills can perform core job task proficiently if the need to interact with others is limited, i.e.

working on an assembly line, computer technician, software designer or artist. In these cases, the *task performance* or set of core substantive tasks and duties central to a particular job are technical in nature. *Task performance* represents the activities that differentiate one occupation from another (Witt & Ferris, 2003).

When an employee works within an organization, *contextual performance* becomes an additional factor in their job performance. *Contextual performance* involves behaviors not formally prescribed by any specific job but rather inherent in all jobs (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993; Borman & Motowidlo, 1997a, 1997b; Motowidlo & Van Scotter, 1994; Van Scotter & Motowidlo, 1996; Van Scotter, Motowidlo, & Cross, 2000). These behaviors support the social fabric of the organization and have two dimensions: *job dedication* and *interpersonal facilitation* (Van Scotter & Motowidlo, 1996). Self-disciplined behaviors such as following rules, working hard, and taking the initiative to solve a problem at work is known as *job dedication* (Van Scotter and Motowidlo, 1996). *Interpersonal facilitation* involves *interpersonally oriented behaviors* that contribute to organizational goal accomplishment (Van Scotter and Motowidlo, 1996). These *interpersonally oriented behaviors* include building and mending relationships, compassion and sensitivity, putting people at ease, cooperation, consideration, and maintaining interpersonal relationships (Conway, 1999).

Whenever the job task requires extensive interpersonal interaction with other employees, customers or constituents, *task performance* and *interpersonal facilitation* are difficult to separate (Witt & Ferris, 2003). Because a significant component of *core task performance* is often the emotional environment created by the employee for the benefit of the customer or constituent (Witt & Ferris, 2003). This emotional environment requires a high level of *interpersonally oriented behaviors* by the employee as part of their core job task.

Therefore, conscientious employees with a core task requiring a high level of *interpersonally oriented behaviors* must possess strong social skills. Conscientiousness without strong social skills can lead to work-related problems (Goleman, 1998). Conscientious employees with underdeveloped social skills that work in an organizational environment requiring a high level of interpersonal interaction may be perceived as difficult to work with by other employees (Witt & Ferris, 2003). The socially unskilled employee may be perceived as unreasonably demanding, inflexible and micromanaging (Witt & Ferris, 2003). They may pursue matters well beyond the point desired by others. The socially unskilled employee may seem to fight the wrong battles or fight every battle that they encounter. They pursue issues with dogged determination without sensitivity to timing or appropriateness. In the mind of the socially unskilled employee, they believe their actions are “**for the good of the organization**” or “**doing what is right**” (Witt & Ferris, 2003). They want to do a good job because they believe in what they are doing. Ironically, despite their best efforts and intentions, the conscientious employee with underdeveloped social skills is perceived as ineffective in their job performance. As a result, employees with a high need for achievement or power are likely to become frustrated when their social skills are underdeveloped relative to their core job task (Leary, 1995).

The research studies found that among workers low in social skills, increases in conscientiousness are associated with lower supervisor rating of job performance (Witt & Ferris, 2003). In contrast, conscientious employees that possess strong social skills and a

high level of social awareness are perceived as successful in their job performance (Witt & Ferris, 2003). This success is reflected in their *interpersonal effectiveness* through their ability to build and manage relationships (Witt & Ferris, 2003). The results of the study found that strong social skill is necessary for conscientious workers to be successful as it relates to job performance (Witt & Ferris, 2003). The conscientious workers successful job performance reflects *interpersonal effectiveness* (Witt & Ferris, 2003).

It is suggested from research that advanced human relations training for workers have been effective (Burke & Day, 1986). Research further suggests that formal training efforts designed to enhance the social skill of workers high in conscientiousness may have utility (e.g., Jordan, Ashkanasy, Hartel, & Hooper, 2002). Researchers envision such skill-building efforts as involving some combination of content and process training and development techniques, which indeed present some principles, but then rely on techniques that maximize the active involvement of participants (Witt & Ferris, 2003).

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