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Pinellas County Human Resources
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Leadership NOTES

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Facing Performance Head On

What is it about performance evaluations that cause people to get nervous? Why do many managers and supervisors have angst about delivering "real" information? How is it that those around an individual often know more about that person's impact than they do themselves? We all have blind spots, and much like the ones in an automobile, they can be hazardous and lead to accidents and unpredictable outcomes.

If we only have conversations with someone once in a while, we are less comfortable. We fill in the gaps with assumptions about what body language means or what we think of the other person's perspective. However, if we build the relationship to understand how we each process information and get used to each other's style, then we understand each other better. Or at least, we give each other the benefit of the doubt, and ask for clarification.

The greater the ambiguity in a supervisory relationship, the greater the confusion about expectations and outcomes in the workgroup. This begins to have a trickle-down effect — leading to ambiguity of priorities, use of resources, customer service expectations, employee engagement … on and on. Many times, "people don't leave jobs, they leave supervisors."

How do we best address this?

- There is no short cut … get to know your direct reports. What are their motivations? What is their communication style? Develop a plan on how to check in on performance; not just quarterly or annually. This is an ongoing conversation.
- As a supervisor or manager, do employees see you around when things are going well in addition to when things are a problem? Does it feel OK to make a mistake and learn from it? Is the responsibility shared or is blame placed?
- Work hard on building an atmosphere of shared feedback. Do you ask your direct reports, peers, and your manager for feedback on how you can improve your own performance? Do you really want this feedback? If you take feedback well, this will become contagious.
- Instead of dreading the tough conversations, do you work on being able to have trusted conversations designed to fit each employee's unique needs for development? If it is deemed as the norm for everyone to have positive aspects of performance, as well as areas of needed improvement, then it will become easier to discuss the whole picture. One of the ways to encourage this is to have debriefing conversations on projects where the group talks about what went well and what needs to improve. If managers and supervisors openly own their part in areas that did not go as well, this becomes a bridge to others admitting their own part in outcomes.

True leadership involves vulnerability, humility, confidence, ownership, attention, service, and curiosity — which runs contrary to some of the traditional models of "all knowing, dictatorial, top down, and tough to approach" personas that leave people confused and wary of discussion.

We reap on the outside what we sow on the inside of organizations. The impact of true leadership is transformative of people and outcomes. Building bridges for meaningful conversations is not easy, yet needed for everyone to do their best.