

Employee Problems, - Finding Root Causes

Think about how we handle non-personnel problems – a sick animal, a wilted crop, an unacceptable green speed, a dissatisfied customer. Even though we are all well trained to address these issues, we still often treat symptoms rather than taking the time to analyze the problem to determine the real or root cause.

What happens when we treat symptoms? Usually the solution we implement works only temporarily at best. The problem soon returns. It is like taking a cough drop for a serious sore throat instead of going to the doctor. If we really want to fix the problem, we must determine the real or root cause.

I believe that the incidence of treating symptoms rather than determining and treating the real or root cause is higher for employee problems than for non-personnel issues like those referred to above.

Let's explore my observations from a recent vacation to understand the importance of seeking root causes.



My wife and I just returned from a twelve day group excursion (through Road Scholar educational adventures) visiting six national parks in the US and Canada from Grand Tetons to Yellowstone to Glacier

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occupational hazard of observing employee performance remained. Two points jumped out from those observations. First, there was great variation in performance among employees within each business. That is to be expected.

More importantly, though, there was a large variation in the level of employee performance between businesses. Employees in one cafeteria we frequented were uniform in their poor performance. By contrast every employee at the hotel we stayed at the last night was proactive in serving us and seemed to do everything perfectly and effortlessly.

Was this dramatic difference due to the quality of the employees at the two business? I think not! Instead, my observation is that the quality of the leadership and supervision was dramatically different!

The second observation concerns how those in our group responded to poor employee performance. Many were upset and blamed the employees. This is where my occupational hazard kicked in. I started

to Banff. We stayed in six hotels/ lodges and ate at numerous restaurants and cafeterias.

Although I did a great job of not working on this vacation, the oc-

thinking about WHY the employee performance was so poor. I was thinking about what leadership had failed to do that prevented employees from performing effectively.

Those who blamed the employees were reacting to symptoms. By asking WHY, I was looking for real or root causes.

Let's return to our poor employee performance cafeteria and look specifically at the cashiers. They were mostly unenthused, slow, and often incapable of pricing meals that were not entirely routine. Clearly, the easy conclusion from observing their behavior – the symptom – is that the cashiers were lazy, unwilling to focus, and unmotivated.

Let's further analyze what I observed and suggest some possible real or root causes:

- **Motivation:** The employees are in fact lazy and do not have sufficient self-motivation to perform. (Although this is possible for individual employees, it is not likely the root cause for all of the employees.)
- **Staffing:** The recruitment and selection processes were inadequate resulting in employees who do

not possess the attributes – skills, knowledge, experience, attitudes – to succeed in this position. (Unlikely here as these are definitely entry level positions.)

- **Training:** The employees were not sufficiently trained in menu items, pricing policies, and customer service. (I believe this was a big part of the real or root cause.)
- **Supervision:** The employees were not being provided clarity – “chalking the field” – and feedback – positive, redirection, negative. (I am pretty certain this was a key root cause. The root cause of the poor supervision was likely lack of supervisory training.)
- **Authority:** The employees had insufficient decision-making authority to effectively make needed decisions. (I saw this as cashiers often had to wait for a supervisor to authorize a charge.)

In this example I trust you have seen the power of identifying the real or root cause of employee problems. You have also seen several of the most common root causes for employee problems.

We conclude our discussion of employee problem root causes with three amplifications to assist you in

determining employee problem root causes.

1. The Fundamental Theorem of Attribution – a key tenant of organizational behavior – holds that when we as human beings are analyzing a problem we caused, we tend to blame the problem on the situation – not on what we did. On the other hand, when we are analyzing a problem someone else created, we tend to blame the person. For employee problems, the Theorem of Attribution is a powerful force keeping supervisors and leaders from seeking real or root causes. It is easier to treat the symptom – blame the employee – than seek root causes that likely will lead back to the supervisors and leaders.

2. The conclusion that an employee problem is caused by the employee should result in some form of employee reprimand – negative feedback. After determining root causes, where the cause was not under the control of the employee, a redirection feedback would be in order. With redirection feedback we provide the employee the training, feedback, authority, clarity, etc. needed to successfully perform. As

we have often discussed, one of the easiest ways to decrease employee trust in their supervisor is to provide a negative feedback when the employee believes he or she should have received redirection feedback. Treating symptoms rather than root causes often creates this disastrous situation.

3. One word – WHY – was prevalent in our discussion of root causes. That is because the key to finding root causes is to ask WHY. Why did this problem happen? In fact a simple and effective tool for determining root cause is called “Five WHYS.” Ask WHY until one or more root causes are found. It is called “Five WHYS” because a root cause is normally found by asking WHY five or fewer times.

A concluding comment: The next time you observe an employee problem, use the Five WHYS and the process we used in the cafeteria cashier example to determine the root cause or causes of the problem. Do not act hastily and respond to symptoms.