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Focus

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Turning a Janitor into a Knowledge Worker

Imagine: If you could transform a janitor into a knowledge worker, just think of the opportunities elsewhere in your organization!

If you supervise people, then you have the power to change the way employees think about and carry out jobs for both their benefit and yours. The company is also better off. It's all in how you view and treat those for whom you are responsible.

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Consider Sid, the maintenance supervisor for Sidetrack Model Trains, and Joe, a janitor. Joe has worked at Sidetrack for 20 years, but goes about his job exactly the way Sid has always directed him. He mops each hall, cleans all the bathrooms, and waxes the floors in an unvarying routine. The sequence and time for each task has remained unchanged from the way Sid first set it up years ago.

But there's a problem. As new models have been introduced (most recently the Cowcrusher locomotive - a smash hit) sales have grown. Accordingly, production schedules vary and Sidetrack's employees use different areas of the building each week. However, the cleaning effort is uniform throughout the building. For example, the smokestack stamping area is used infrequently, but after Lurch is finished banging out a supply of smokestacks it takes a week of routine cleaning to tidy up the mess.

Moreover, Sid is under increasing pressure from Gomez, the company president, to reduce costs, and Gomez is complaining about dirty parts of the building. Things are looking tough for Sid: fewer resources but increasing demands. Gomez even made a thinly veiled threat to replace Sid with Thing!

Now Supervisor Sid does a smart thing. He meets with Janitor Joe, his longest serving employee, and lays out the situation: cut costs but improve quality. He also relaxes some of his formerly ironclad work rules and tells Joe he can be flexible on how much time he spends on each building area. Specifically, Sid asks Joe to use judgment and spend more time on really dirty areas and less time cleaning areas lightly used that day. Joe is understandably cautious, and somewhat reluctant to do things differently, because he doesn't want to get in trouble with his supervisor. But Sid is patient and encouraging, and after a few weeks Joe gets the hang of his new freedom. The overall appearance of the building improves, and Sid receives fewer complaints from Gomez.

One day a mop salesman showed up at Sid's desk, and Sid did another smart thing. He called Joe to join the meeting with the salesman. At one point during the meeting, Joe said, "I'm having problems with wax buildup in corners. I've been spending extra time on that but it's getting worse." Then the mop salesman recommended a triangular scrub brush, which Joe thought would help greatly. So Sid ordered some new scrub brushes.

A few weeks later Sid invited Joe to meet with a cleaning chemical salesman. When Joe complained about having to wait for the floor to dry between cleaning and waxing, the salesman offered a new product that cleaned and waxed in one application. Sid authorized a trial of the new product, but told Joe he wanted a report on the durability of the one-step application.

Sid continued to be patient and supportive, encouraging Joe to speak up and think more about better ways to do his job. Joe had never been asked to think before, much less offer his opinion. Although Sid's new behavior was mildly unsettling, it made Joe feel more valued and respected as a person. These new feelings made Joe take more pride in his work because he wanted more of the positive "strokes" he received from Sid.

Things improved for Sid, too. Even on a good day (which seemed to be less frequent lately!) Sid was unfamiliar with the constantly changing challenges Joe faced performing his job. Giving Joe more control over his work took some load off Sid. Sid knew his was still responsible, but he still felt better knowing Joe was at least "thinking a little" about the end result of his labors. Like Gomez said, "Results, not excuses!"

After a few more months, mops and cleaning supply salesmen began dealing directly with Joe for reorders and new products; they only made courtesy calls to Sid to thank him for Sidetrack's business.

Thanks to better chemicals and application techniques, the building areas looked better and Joe was able to maintain areas for which he previously never had time, like the caboose closet and cowcatcher cage. Sid's boss Gomez began praising him for staying under budget and improving "the looks of the place." Sid got an above average raise at his annual performance review, and then knew for certain that he was on the right track. He continued to encourage Joe, who also got a raise, and soon had Joe training other janitors how to be flexible and efficient in their work. Even Pugsley, a notoriously sloppy cleaner, began performing better. Before long, Joe was promoted to Chief Janitor.

This fable is entirely plausible. Sid created a knowledge worker. He took advantage of Joe's mind, not just his muscle, and as a consequence created a more productive, happier, and dependable employee. For his efforts, Sid enjoyed better outcomes, lower cost, and fewer management headaches.

The key lesson is how Sid viewed Joe and his job. He didn't ask Joe to work longer, or harder. He didn't give Joe an IQ pill to make his smarter. All Sid did was rethink how he could best use Joe. Sid chose to unleash more of the untapped human potential in Joe. He coached and delegated authority and created an environment wherein Joe became an innovator. Problems were mostly solved by the cleaning crews, and faster to boot. Importantly, Sid did not need more money, approval from his boss, or anything outside his control.

Imagine how much more untapped human potential lies undiscovered at Sidetrack Model Trains. What about your organization?

Tom Wagner

We help clarify options so our clients
identify the Right Questions
and solve the Right Problems.

Call us at 800 422-1374 to learn more.

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