Six processes for improving day-to-day operations

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How does one create a good working environment without resorting exclusively to incentives? These six processes may help.

Sometimes it takes more than a rousing speech to lift flagging spirits in a company. In "Procedimientos de avance y sistemas de dirección" ("Procedures for Advancing and Management Systems"), IESE Prof. Luis Manuel Calleja suggests six basic components of management systems for improving professional coexistence. Employees may never work together perfectly, but following these procedures will at least ensure they get along satisfactorily at work.

The overall goal is clarification, specification and commitment. In other words, employees need to know clearly what their purpose is in the company, who they must work with, what is expected of them, how to progress and what help is needed to do these things. Therefore, executives should:

1. Define tasks clearly
This is the process that contributes the most in terms of fostering professional coexistence. Mangers must confirm that the tasks are comprehensible and in fact exist. The aim here is to promote initiative, commitment and consensus among the employees involved, as well as bring order. The most effective means of providing an overall vision are meetings with two or three people.

Giving the employees specific assignments is fundamental for preventing gaps from opening up between managers and the rest of the employees; often neither side knows what the other is doing. These are not problems of communication but rather disjunction between the business and the specific tasks of its people.

2. Measure compliance

Managers need to verify whether the planned tasks have been completed and find out if anything has gone off course. This does not mean casting judgment, but rather evaluating the progress toward the established goal. This is the only way to make improvements, as it enables employees to initiate changes to their own work.

The danger arises when managers have black-and-white mindsets - tasks must be thoughtfully evaluated and not simply measured in a cut-and-dried fashion. As Calleja explains, "The monotony of the measurement system reduces people's commitment and stunts their initiative."

Moreover, colleagues must have managers with sound knowledge of the problems that arise in carrying out the tasks; it is not enough to simply offer generalized information or unrealistic details in the planning phase.

3. Make changes when needed

There are tasks that can get throttled if left in the hands of certain employees, and jump-started if reassigned to someone else. These changes should be reasonable for everyone involved and require time, information and follow-up by managers. For this reason, each change must be handled individually. The first goal should be improvement, followed by enrichment and motivation. Of course, the needs of the business always need to be taken into account.

4. Provide professional career development

Not training coworkers is essentially managing for the short term. It is important to provide the information needed to achieve internal promotion and invest in rejuvenating the staff. To achieve the latter, collaboration between new and veteran employees should be encouraged. Doing so will create an atmosphere of continuous learning: the veterans will serve as mentors, and everyone teaches one another. While there may be people for whom this does not come naturally, the principle must at least be promoted.

5. Offer fair compensation

The director is responsible for reorienting the role played by financial incentives in an organization. "One must try to stay in touch with the work being done by each person, so as to be able to reward them with money, as well as with recognition, development, promotion and positive feedback," says the author.

To do this, one must be aware of the salary levels in the market and design straightforward compensation schemes based on a balance of fixed and variable components according to tasks, and with a certain discretionary percentage for the person on whom the employee depends most directly.

6. Reward and punish

Rewards must be given to those who do good, and penalties to those who do bad; both are necessary. No one likes penalizing others, but it is a vital part of management. Above all, there must be clearly defined criteria for this. It is a resource that should not turn into a juvenile contest for giving out medals, certificates and reproaches. The rewards should not only be about money or promotions; sometimes it is enough to simply assign employees tasks they enjoy.

Calleja points out that these are all part of the duties that managers must fulfill. He adds that these procedures do not require major changes or restructuring; they are merely a few simple steps that depend largely on the actions of the company and on the people executing those actions. Managing, even when one's own mistakes can sometimes cause subordinates to lose confidence in the manager, is about performing these tasks in a consistent manner.

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