

*Many businesses overlook the leadership potential of middle management.*

**It's a truism** that no business – of any size – can achieve its full potential without good people, says Linda Chander, Director of Enskills Learning and Development. What's less widely recognised is that while the right people can boost your capabilities, the wrong people can sap your company's strength and can cause top-level talent to leave in droves.

Middle managers, especially, have a vital role to play in this respect, says Chander, whose organisation specialises in developing training programs in the field of business communications and personal development.

## LEADERSHIP FOR MIDDLE MANAGERS

and employee on opposite sides. "When both feel that they are on the same side and working towards the same goals the process is much more productive," says Chander.

Traditionally managers have tackled performance reviews by locking themselves away and ploughing their way through a stack of review forms piling up on the desk. Because reviews are traditionally undertaken only once a year, few data are usually tracked so the manager must try to recall on the spot significant occurrences that might help them to evaluate employees.

Meanwhile, tension builds up among each member of staff. They have no idea what to expect. Regardless of the outcome, everyone sighs with relief when it's over.

"There's no substitute for a manager with vision, a leader with consistent people management skills who can show the way forward in the middle of growing complexity on an increasingly global playing field," she says.

Yet many businesses fail to provide appropriate training for middle managers, often with devastating consequences.

Take performance management. In many companies performance reviews are an annual event dreaded by managers and the workforce. Yet they're an essential tool for giving feedback and encouraging better performance, Chander points out.

And performance management is an area that requires strong skills from middle management. Poorly handled, reviews can create great anxiety in employees because they put manager

There's obviously a better way to manage performance reviews, says Chander. That is to transform them from an annual event into an ongoing process of informed feedback, complemented by an annual or better, biannual strategy sessions. "With ongoing feedback there are no shocks, no surprises, no tension, no fears of getting stabbed in the back."

Ongoing feedback sessions are an opportunity for the manager and employee to come together, reflect on the past review period, acknowledge accomplishments, strategise development opportunities and identify goals.

## STOPPING THE EXODUS

With more and more baby boomers opting to leave the workplace sooner rather than later, many industries are predicting that between 25 and 45 percent of their more senior employees will take early retirement. When they leave they will take vast amounts of business knowledge with them. Businesses should set up strategies now to delay the exodus of older workers, Chander advises.

One option is a mentoring program in which more experienced employees serve as advisers and guides to new employees. This sort of system can renew an older worker's engagement in the business, underlining their value to the organisation.

Another strategy is to retain employees as consultants for one or two days a month, extending that handover period to pass on valuable knowledge and skills.

Ultimately, people skills are the most widely regarded of all leadership skills.

Coaching and mentoring are important management tools, but there's some confusion about the difference between them, and when each should be used, says Chander.

Mentoring involves the pairing of two individuals, one of whom demonstrates qualities and competencies that the other less experienced employee would like to develop in themselves. The mentor is a counsellor, a consultant, a guide. "It's about developing the employee as a whole, a holistic approach to personal development," says Chander.

Coaching is skills-based, involving skills-related learning and growth that makes use of observation and data collection while focusing on behaviours and techniques.

#### ESSENTIAL SKILLS

Mediation and negotiation are essential skills for middle managers to master, Chander says. "Every day we are involved in negotiating, influencing and persuading other people, trying to get them to come around to our way of thinking."

For a manager to build negotiating skills he or she should understand how to establish their "bargaining arena". "They must know what their bottom line is. They have to be clear what they are able to sacrifice and which priorities they would prefer to focus on."

Mediation involves a different but equally important set of skills. When there's conflict among team members or interdepartmentally, certain individuals are called on to act as independent observers and to help facilitate a settlement – another reason that good middle management is vital.

Ultimately, people skills are the most widely regarded of all leadership skills, says Chander. The development of people skills is something all middle managers who aspire to positions of greater leadership should embrace.

"That spans communication, empathy, understanding as well as technical skills related to strategy, development and process." ■

Linda Chander will be presenting a series of seminars for the Institute of Chartered Accountants on Leadership for Middle Managers in Sydney and Melbourne from July to October. For further information please call 1300 137 322.

#### KEY POINTS

- Developing the skills of middle management is an essential element of a staff retention strategy
- Performance reviews are least effective when they put manager and employee on opposing sides
- Ongoing feedback and biannual strategy sessions take the anxiety out of performance management
- Businesses must adopt strategies to delay the exodus of older workers through mentoring and other programs
- Coaching, mentoring, mediation and negotiation are middle management skills that can be developed through training