

3 tips to improve your employees' productivity - from a behavioural change specialist



Ask any company head or business leader how important employee productivity is to them, and they will tell you that it is right up there with a strong bottom line and a good coffee machine. But productivity, in itself, shouldn't be the starting point; rather, it should be the people.

So says Arjen de Bruin, Group CEO at OIM Consulting, specialists in organisational improvement through front-line leader coaching and development. De Bruin believes that if you adopt a people-first approach, productivity is the natural by-product.

He sees the same challenges across the various industries in which the consultancy operates.

"Productivity has always raised an issue, and so we conduct a thorough assessment prior to rolling out our programme, to assess where the problem lies.

"Within mining and manufacturing, as well as warehouse distribution and fast-moving consumer goods, we see a similar competency profile among employees. Planning and organising is typically the poorest competency across the board; followed by analysis and problem-solving; and finally, leadership and development, with only 17% of workers classed as proficient in their roles. We have seen how these areas curtail organisational productivity."

He also highlights that within these industries, assertiveness typically ranks high. "You will find that supervisors are used to operating in a reactive manner; they are assertive and able to handle problems that arise but they're not always able to plan effectively and prevent a problem from occurring, which results in time wastage."

In financial services, the same problems rear their heads, but in a somewhat different order. “Among the staff who form part of the back office operations, we find that planning and organising is typically where it should be, but assertiveness is low. This means that when it comes to critical decision-making, confidence is lacking and this can negatively impact outcomes.”

Anecdotally, De Bruin notes that South Africans can also be somewhat erratic when it comes to productivity. “We have periods of extreme productivity, but then sometimes take the pedal off the metal. We’re also not inherently process-driven; we need something to make absolute sense to us in order for us to adhere to it, and this can derail us when it comes to our efforts in the workplace.”

However, he adds that overall, South Africans have a good work ethic. “We have seen that when employees are empowered with tools and coached to be more consistent in planning and organising, as well as other areas such as analysis and problem-solving, there is a sharp uptick in productivity.”

De Bruin shares three tips for companies seeking to get the most out of their employees in the workforce.

Employees must see how their performance is linked to the big picture

Performance is linked to purpose. Your employees need to see how what they do each day ties into the big picture; how it *matters*.

The first step is always to clearly define what your company stands for, creating structure and alignment. Employees then need to be brought into the process and shown how these values translate into day-to-day action and behaviour. The energy of employees needs to be focused frequently and leaders need to be visible, engaged and continuously carrying the culture of the organisation.

And not only do employees need to see the link between their performance and the company’s operations or strategy, but also how it relates to their own lives; the benefit it can bring them. For example, if the company reaches target, there might be a financial incentive for them, such as a bonus. Or they might gain a new skill and feel more empowered in their role.

Teach through training, entrench through coaching

De Bruin says that companies typically invest a great deal in training employees, sending them on courses and to workshops. However, without coaching, these remain cerebral; it’s very difficult for these new habits and behaviours to embed themselves in the employee’s day-to-day conduct.

Coaching is integral as it helps to entrench theoretical learnings through practical, real-life – and here’s the important bit – *repeated* application. People need guidance; if you want to see an uptick in your employees’ performance, look for programmes that offer coaching as a core component of the methodology.

Collaborate don’t dictate

In De Bruin’s experience, he has seen that the best way to get employees on side is through collaboration. “The two worst styles of leadership are autocratic or *laissez-faire*, which means to let people do whatever they like.

“There needs to be engagement and collaboration; people need to feel like their input is heard and their insights are valued. There also needs to be accountability. Yes, sometimes hard decisions need to be made, but consulting with employees beforehand helps to bring them on-side, which will ultimately be reflected in their performance and productivity. Valued employees are engaged employees are productive employees.”