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Myth Busters: Breaking through Workplace Misconceptions

False assumptions may be a fact of life, but they can pose particular challenges in the workplace. Some misconceptions can be narrowly focused on our own careers—for example, certainty that a promotion is out of our reach or that an employer will never subsidize

our efforts to earn a master's degree. But many fallacies, especially those held by a manager, can affect others and limit the manager's ability to keep a group's productivity and morale high.

It's hard to say which workplace myths are most common, but just being aware of some of these assumptions can help you identify those of your own and improve your effectiveness as a manager. Here are a few beliefs held by some supervisors—both new and experienced—and a look at how taking a broader perspective can have a positive effect on a team of professionals.

Only working parents want work/life balance. When thinking of employees seeking work/life balance, chances are that working parents are the first group managers think of. Yet research shows this issue is a growing

concern to all employees. In a 2005 survey by research and consulting firm ISR, 34% of 200,000 workers polled said the demands of their jobs seriously interfere with their private lives. Additionally, in a survey by the Society for Human Resource Management, workers younger than 35 said that work/life balance is the most important component to their overall job satisfaction.

When offering employees benefits such as flexible schedules and telecommuting, be sure to include everyone. A single person who wants to leave early one day for volunteer work should be given the same consideration as a parent requesting a shortened workday to attend a child's after-school performance. It's important to demonstrate through your actions that you respect the needs of all of your staff. At the same time, you will minimize potential

discord among employees, some of whom may perceive others as receiving greater benefits simply because of their gender or parental status.

The baby boomer "brain drain" is inevitable. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) estimates that by 2008, 22 million workers who are 45 or older will start leaving the workforce, primarily due to retirement. Two of the job categories expected to see a higher-than-average number of departures in that age group in the coming years, BLS reports, are financial managers as well as bookkeepers and accounting and auditing clerks. Along with these retirements goes much of an organization's institutional knowledge.

The good news is that most firms already are implementing measures to minimize the resulting knowledge loss. In a recent survey by our company, 78% of executives said their firms are taking steps to compensate for the departure of baby-boom-age workers.

Among the ways accounting departments can prepare is by instituting succession plans and providing professional development opportunities to high-potential employees. Encourage boomers to share their expertise and serve as mentors,

trainers, or consultants to junior staff before they retire. With adequate training, the next generation of accounting leaders can move into roles vacated by tenured staff with minimal disruption.

Don't discount the idea of convincing some employees to postpone retirement, whether by remaining in the same position or taking on a new role. Tenured workers come with well-developed networks, and they already know the firm's priorities and culture, an advantage they could utilize in taking on new projects or in providing guidance to less-experienced employees. Your flexibility in offering alternative arrangements, such as part-time, consulting, and project work, could place you ahead of your competitors in your ability to convince older workers to stay longer. A recent Conference Board study found that older workers increasingly want to remain in their jobs for both personal fulfillment and financial reasons.

Good employees don't need training. Certainly, all managers want new employees who can adapt quickly to change and constantly add value to the organization as soon as they're on the job. While there's nothing wrong with seeking these qualities—they should be desired—they don't always preclude the need for training.

Someone may be an excellent tax accountant, for instance, possessing strong knowledge of the latest tax codes and a track record of identifying ways to minimize liabilities, but no matter how notable the talent with accounting matters, if the person lacks interpersonal skills, he or she may never be successful in a management position. Classes, seminars, or other training in related subjects become essential for the transition to a supervisory role.

The best accounting professionals will be highly motivated and committed to continuous learning. Companies that support educational opportunities will find they not only have a more skilled workforce, but they are better able to attract and retain top employees.

E-mail is always the most efficient communication method. E-mail has become so prevalent in the workplace that it's hard to remember a time without it. As its popularity has grown, however, so has overreliance and misuse.

E-mail has revolutionized business communication, but that doesn't mean it's always the best option. If you're explaining a complex procedure to a colleague and it requires multiple rounds of e-mails, for example, then you're likely losing valuable time. Often, picking up the phone or having a face-to-face discussion can minimize confusion on difficult issues.

Failing to shatter workplace myths in your organization can contribute to poor morale, unrealistic expectations, and lost time. Assess your practices to make sure you aren't succumbing to any of these misconceptions. ■

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