

## **The Employer's Role in Employee Work Ethic**

Solving the problem of poor work ethic in the nation's labour force can be a responsibility that is shared by several parties, the most important of which are the government, via our education system; and the private sector, via the work of executives in positions of management and ownership.

The perfect employee arrives to work already imbued with a respect for the intrinsic value of work and an acceptance of responsibility for its proper completion. Outside of this ideal, however, is the reality that businesses should act under the assumption that its employees require motivation to perform at a high-level, rather than relying on an individual's personal standards. In addition, businesses should acknowledge the existence of poor employer work ethic. Recognition of this enables an un-blinkered view of what a company can do to ensure it provides an environment which can sustain good work ethic amongst its employees.

### **What is work ethic?**

An ethic is a set of principles of right conduct. Work ethic then, is an extension of this conduct or behaviour, to the workplace. It may run the gamut from ethical and moral behaviour (no theft of company property), to effective interpersonal relationships with clients and colleagues, to what is viewed as professionalism (being dependable and showing initiative). Generally, however, all businesses share common overall criteria for defining what constitutes a "good" or "poor" work ethic.

The elements which comprise good work ethic are also requirements for the achievement of good performance but it must be noted that poor performance by an individual could be caused by reasons other than just poor work ethic. Therefore, companies must ensure that 'poor work ethic' is not being used as shorthand, or as the default reason, for 'poor performance'. The former has personal responsibility connotations while the latter demands a wider analysis which looks to the roots of the problem which may or may not lie solely with the employee.

### **The causes of poor performance**

Apart from poor work ethic and the existence of macroeconomic vagaries more powerful than either the employee or the institution, substandard employee performance can be caused by, amongst many other things, an employee who is ill-suited to a particular role, has not received sufficient on-the-job training, is embroiled in a contentious employee-supervisor relationship, or is otherwise dissatisfied with the job.

The reasons behind poor performance could be as many as the actual number of employees within a company. One way in which to learn more about the members of a labour force is to ask questions of them. Whether done by survey or orally, companies should encourage employee feedback. This has a direct link to an employee's sense of belonging and empowerment within an organisation, which in turn positively affects employee output.

The performance appraisal is a vehicle already existing in many organisations, which may be tweaked to encourage detailed feedback from employees on their motivations. Perhaps the employee who Management assumed was driven by performance-based bonuses would gain greater satisfaction from being granted flexible working hours; or the employee who it was assumed wanted a job which provided the opportunity for promotion, in reality, preferred a role which provided the opportunity for lateral moves throughout the company and the development of new skills.

Another cause of poor employee performance lies in the failure of the employer to abide by a proper set of its own work ethics. The perfect employee has already been described, but what of the perfect employer? This would be an individual or institution which provides a safe work environment; treats employees with dignity and respect; operates the business with integrity; and provides fair wages. However, once again if you were to step outside of such a utopia, business executives must acknowledge that there is ample evidence of employers who remain non-compliant with OSHA regulations, have been found guilty of improper practices by the Industrial Court, engage in unprofessional and unethical business conduct at the top echelons of management, and base wage levels primarily on what they can "get away with".

### **When a poor work ethic is, in fact, the problem**

Regardless of the above, it is undeniable that there are many employees in today's workforce who enter an organisation lacking an individual sense of responsibility and self-discipline, while saddled with under-developed social skills and low self-esteem. Faced with such an individual, the employer must initially shore up its first line of defence, which is its written guidelines and expectations for the operation of the company – and by extension the behaviour of its staff.

Timely training of new employees and continuous re-training of current staff is essential to enforcing these written guidelines. An employee who receives a well-written manual, explicit on several details, including the office dress code, notwithstanding having read such a document, will not wear a jacket and tie for long, if seated next to a colleague whose uniform appears to be a polo shirt.

Therefore, adherence to all aspects of a company's workplace guidelines must be upheld by everyone. Supervisors or those who seem to be exempt from the rules create dissension in the ranks and make the process of attaining good work ethic amongst everyone, even more difficult.

### **The role of education**

We've defined the perfect employee and the perfect employer. In a perfect world, the nation's education system would have seen to the development in its young citizens of not just the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic and the thinking skills of reasoning, decision-making and problem-solving, but also the personal qualities and 'employability' skills of self-management, pride in work, personal image, interpersonal skills and integrity.

This last set of 'employability' skills and behaviours can be integrated into a school curriculum by the choice of subjects on offer (melding purely academic topics with vocational skills in all schools), the manner in which they are taught (inclusion of case studies), through the fervent promotion of extra-curricular but still school-based activities such as student councils and entrepreneurial business groups, and the encouragement of volunteerism in the student body.

Once this is done, and these students grow into young adults having had the benefit of a more holistic education, we should expect a cadre of business executives pleased at the outset, with the productive nature of their work force which would produce a more business friendly environment in Trinidad and Tobago.