



Commitment over Compliance

Commitment over compliance may be an effective strategy for success that can be adopted by anyone who manages people, in particular those experiencing mental health issues. This approach is intended as an alternative to coming up with plans and solutions that we ask the employee to comply with, such as accommodation plans, return to work strategies or conflict resolution approaches, and instead asking the employee to actively engage in developing a plan, strategy or approach that they are willing and able to commit to over the long term.

This concept is about respecting an individual enough to help them commit to their own success and allowing them to lead the way by telling you how they can achieve that success.

Even when they may have a mental illness?

Mental illnesses such as depression or anxiety-related disorders often erode self-confidence in even the most accomplished professional person. While these illnesses rarely take away any previously existing skill and talent for the job, they may make the person feel less competent. The healthcare system may in some cases also contribute to an employee's feelings of disempowerment.

During times of recovery or when the condition is manageable, it can be extremely helpful to give back a level of control and responsibility to the employee by involving them in committing to their own success and wellness at work. Time after time, this approach has been experienced by persons as a "breath of fresh air" or "a new lease on life" or "a fresh start" as they focus not on what they cannot do, but rather on what they can do. When we set up the dynamic of commitment, we help to empower the individual to think about the approaches that may work for them and to imagine their own success.

But I'M the boss

The first reaction to this concept may be that you are giving away your authority and responsibility, but this is not the intention. Your job is to manage the outcomes and objectives of your organization. If the command and control model is working for you, then why would you change? The problem is that today, this method of leadership can often be problematic, especially when faced with emotional distress or mental health issues. There are situations that demand command and control for safety and effectiveness. Cardiac arrest procedures, theatre of war, and a fire scene are examples where taking time to hear what your employees think would be ineffective. In each of these workplaces, however, nurses, soldiers and firefighters can benefit from an increase in a sense of their own power to control their workday outcomes. What commitment over compliance does is recognize that while you need to ensure WHAT is accomplished, the individual who is doing the work may have a say in deciding HOW it is accomplished. Even heavily regulated processes that leave little room for choice can be subject to the commitment over compliance approach.

For example, one man who demonstrated the safe use of equipment was governed by Canadian Standards Association (CSA) guidelines for the process. For reasons we will not go into here, the process, which included physically touching those who were learning to use the equipment, was no longer acceptable for him. This individual was tasked with coming up with an alternative that allowed him to do his job in a way that was consistent with the standard and was effective in teaching the safe use of equipment. It took him only one night to come up with a solution. This was a man who was recovering from a mental illness and had been out of work for over one year. His solution was not only consistent with the standard, but ended up being adopted by others who did the same job. This is not an exceptional case. In the vast majority of the return to work or stay at work cases, it is the employee who has come up with innovative and effective ways to accomplish the tasks of their job, in spite of any disability.

Manage expectations

Of course it is necessary to collaborate and sometimes to coach in order to get at solutions that are acceptable for your work situation. Sometimes the offered solution is not acceptable, and you may need to redirect using the “Before You Say No, Ask Why” approach.

If I do it for one, I will have to do it for everyone

You may be concerned that allowing employees to come up with their own approach may open a floodgate of requests by other employees wanting the same treatment. This is much less of an issue if you manage the approach so that it reduces the chance of putting anyone else at a disadvantage. This can be done by asking how co-workers will respond to the possible solution that is offered by the employee. One person who suggested that someone cover for them at the reception desk when they were upset responded that her co-workers were already really busy and would feel that this was unfair. When asked what she could do about that, she thought for a moment and responded that since the people she would ask to cover for her hated filing, and she found filing soothing, she could do this for them while they were covering for her. This not only had the effect of helping the co-workers to see the solution as fair, but they eventually began to ask her if she didn't need a break because they had filing that needed to be done.

And what else?

When we are upset for any reason – in crisis, stressed out, or experiencing a mental health issue – our minds are less clear. For this reason, it is important to be patient and thorough when exploring what is needed to allow for successful completion of the work. The phrase “and what else...” can be helpful in letting the individual know that you are open to considering all of the possible solutions. In addition, in a state of emotional distress, what is top of mind may or may not be the most relevant or important factor in success. By digging deeper, we improve our chances at getting at the critical factors to success.

Restory or reframe

Many people recognize that negativity is a symptom of depression and anxiety-related disorders, but feel blocked or frustrated by the expression of these thoughts. Some use the approach of trying to apply logic to an emotional issue by arguing the “facts” as they see them or simply telling the distressed individual that they are wrong. As I am sure you can guess, this rarely works to improve the situation. By using a technique referred to as ‘restorying’ we can help to gently rephrase a situation in a way that offers some hope for moving beyond the problem or negativity.

For example, one person who continually talked about how everyone in the office was out to get her and hated her, was brought back to a time where this was not true. This was important so that she could imagine that time existing once again. She was then helped to see that maybe people had a wrong impression of her and that this could change. When we restoried from “everyone hates me” to the idea of changing people's minds about her, we were able to move forward to new approaches.

Recap

Commitment over compliance involves a specific skill set of helping people to arrive at their own solution for success at work. It takes patience and a mindset that can withstand not being in total control throughout the process. The payoff can be huge. It can include a solution that only the individual could have thought of or a solution that you could never have demanded in the first place due to issues of confidentiality, labour laws or some other boundary. It can free the individual to consider personal, health, family and workplace factors that impact their success and to commit to modifying any or all of these. It can allow them to imagine their own success and to work towards achieving it. And importantly, it helps them to realize that your support for their success is real.