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Minds at Work: **MEET THE SLACKEYS**

By Jeff Jolton, Ph.D.

HOST: Welcome to “Minds at Work” where our job is to help your mind become inspired by your work.

I’m your host, Drew Hoffmeyer.

In today’s amusing episode entitled, “Meet the Slackkeys,” Jeff Jolton, Ph.D., Executive Consultant, and Kenexa’s Director of Global Consulting, speaks to us about people who impede productivity and success through their interactions. He affectionately calls these individuals whom he can find at any level of your organization, the “slackkeys.” You know exactly who they are.

DR. JEFF JOLTON: I think we all know that organizations are made up of individuals. The reality is that individuals tend to act normally and productively; some, however, react adversely to the specific roles and situations that they face at work. At any level of the organization, you’re going to find people who impede productivity and success through the way they interact with the organization. As a result, people can be dysfunctional at work in many, many different ways. Perhaps those who are dysfunctional also irritate or irk most people and are those who do the least work. And the worst of these offenders are the individuals who remain committed to staying at the organization, but they’re not engaged. That is, they don’t make a meaningful contribution and they aren’t going anywhere. You know exactly who these individuals are. These are the people you wonder about. Gee, why are you here? You cringe when you find out they are included on your project team. Some of these people appear quite content, but they are just not productive. They just exist, occupying space in your organization.

Other people are problematic at the other end of the spectrum. They are complaining about everything and anything and never really propose any solutions or take action to make things better. These people I call the “slackkeys.” And as mentioned, there are two kinds of “slackkeys” out there. “Happy slackkeys” are those who harbor no real dissatisfaction within the company. They just come to work, punch the proverbial or even literal clock and maintain some level of minimally acceptable job performance. These people are pleasant, are friendly, but don’t really contribute anything. They don’t see any issue with their behavior. In fact, these people are very shocked when they receive any kind of feedback that they’re not meeting performance standards.

On the other side of the spectrum, are the “whiney slackkeys.” “Whiney slackkeys” are those who are dissatisfied. These are the employees we talk about as having an attitude problem. Unlike their content counterparts, “whiney slackkeys” complain about everything, whether it is real or not, that is wrong with the company. Nothing is good enough. Management never makes the right decisions, problems that arise are always someone else’s fault. These are the people who, if you ask, “How are things going?” you get the response, “awful as usual.” Despite their perception that all is wrong in the world, they actually do very little to make things better or more positive, and why should they? The joy they get is in making the rest of the world look bad.

Now it’s very important to distinguish the difference between the gripes of the “whiney slackkeys” and the legitimate criticisms that would come from an engaged individual. Some truly engaged employees often make constructive, critical comments about their organization. The distinction between these individuals and “whiney slackkeys,” however, is they are working to be part of the solution, they are engaged enough to want to make a difference. They offer suggestions for improvement, take initiative, and actively work to make the situation better. They don’t just complain about it. You want these people in your organization. They are engaged, they are action-oriented, and they want the best for the company.

“whiney slackkeys” are none of these things. “slackkeys,” happy or whiney, are allowed to flourish in organizations that fail to hold people accountable for standards of performance. These are companies that have failed to provide honest and direct feedback about performance and failed to communicate clear standards of performance. “Slackkeys” often fly just under the performance radar. They aren’t your worst performers because they don’t want to leave the organization. They are committed to staying as long as they can. They just aren’t going to make a real contribution. As a result, companies unintentionally even end up reinforcing the “slackkeys” through neglect and avoidance. For a manager, these are the difficult people to engage and motivate. The “happy slackkey” is pleasant and the good cheer makes it difficult for some managers to have an honest performance discussion with them. The “whiney slackkey” constantly has attitude and people just plain try to avoid them. “Slackkeys” won’t walk out the door so you have to document performance issues if your organization would benefit without them. After appropriate warnings and opportunities to do better, show any “slackkey” the door if his or her performance doesn’t improve.

Some “slackkeys” are victims of their environment. When put in the right role, they are actually motivated to do more. Others, frankly, never improve. As a manager, you have to give it your best try. But realize you’re paying the “slackkey” when you could be using that same salary to pay another productive worker, or even give a raise to the other workers who frankly are making up the slack.

You can also make sure that those you hire have characteristics that fit with the organization, which make them less likely to be “slackkeys.” These individuals tend to behave and think quite differently than productive performers. Knowing that these differences exist can help you avoid hiring “slackkeys.” “Slackkeys” can exist at all levels of the organization. Some are very skilled at hiding their incompetency’s. Others are carried forward by systems that don’t recognize real performance or that promote people just to get them out of here. So watch out for the “slackkeys,” they’ll drain your resources and in some cases, your personal energies. So recognize them for what they are, weak performers, and encourage them to move on.

HOST: We hope you enjoyed hearing today’s episode, and thank you for joining us at “Minds at Work,” where we offer you insight into becoming better employees, partners, parents, friends and neighbors. Visit our website at Kenexapods.com to find the original transcript of this episode or just to drop us a line. That’s Kenexapods.com. This episode was brought to you by Kenexa, a leader in building the world’s greatest workforces and serving humanity every day.

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