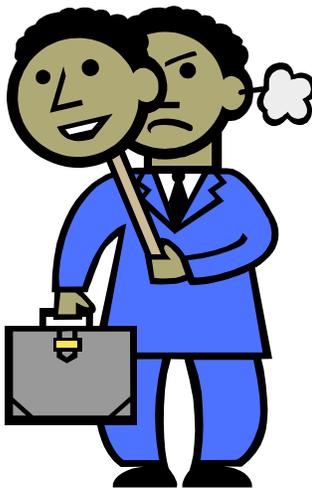


THE #1 MISTAKE MANAGERS MAKE

By Sylvia Hepler, Executive Coach and Advisor

A client of mine had been fired by her Board last year for reasons she didn't understand until we worked together for several months. Upon teasing it all out, she and I discovered that she'd emphasized staff performance and productivity to the exclusion of demonstrating a personal investment in them as human beings. The end result? Some of the employees turned against her. They approached Board members behind her back, shredded her credibility as an executive, and eventually watched her pack up her desk. Apparently, they felt no remorse for their actions, which they believed were justified. They felt betrayed, used, and abused. Had these people exercised good process for dealing with a situation they believed they couldn't live with? Absolutely not. Working the Board on the sly is never a wise move except perhaps in cases of proven theft or sexual harassment. But this is what they did, and a committed, intelligent, sensitive, highly skilled boss lost her job. A boss who could have been brought to see the light had the Board Chair been honest with her...

My client tends to be a bottom line kind of manager. This is how she's wired. That's not enough, however, to survive and thrive in a leadership capacity. It's not enough to expect staff persons to crank out the work every week and not care about what it takes from them to make that happen. To not care—and demonstrate caring-- about the fact that somebody's husband just died, her grandmother is sick, his child is manic depressive, she recently received a breast cancer diagnosis, or he's really tired today. It's simply not enough to focus on numbers and outcomes. **Credible management requires a comprehensive, holistic approach that combines a mindset for business and a very soft heart. It's an art.**



What does this kind of caring look like in the work environment? Let's first establish clearly that caring is NOT letting employees off the hook when they fail to meet an important deadline, short shrift quality on a project, treat a colleague poorly, or offer fistfuls of excuses for ignoring something they are responsible for doing. Caring is not about accepting what shouldn't be tolerated. It's not about relaxing the standards. It's not about turning your head when you know somebody's doing something wrong or ineptly. Workplace caring has keen vision. It sees things the way they are but simultaneously employs a lens of compassion. It then acts within that realm of compassion, yet still does what needs to be done, however difficult or inconvenient.

The following are examples of possible faces of workplace caring:

1. Stopping briefly in the middle of a busy day to inquire about the progress of somebody's sick child.

This type of conversation, perhaps only three minutes long, shows that you as a manager are invested in the feelings and wellbeing of that staffer. Clients sometimes tell me they don't have time for this sort of thing. My response is that you cannot afford not to take the time. We're not talking about spending half an hour on the issue. We're talking about briefly demonstrating your humanity to a fellow human who is worried, fatigued, and temporarily burdened. At that moment you are not the boss, and she is not your subordinate. The two of you are just partners journeying through a life that frequently throws curve balls nobody counts on. When you make the time to enter into these conversations, you show strength, not weakness.

2. Giving on the spot praise

The fact is that all people crave praise. There are no exceptions. Folks need it to keep on going, keep on giving, keep on growing. People dry up without it. Waiting to praise an employee during his annual evaluation six months from now is inadequate behavior on your part. Do it now. Don't delay. Speak to that individual at your first opportunity. Type a quick email. Leave a phone message. Would you wait six months or even six days to praise your five year old for performing a household chore you didn't expect her to do? Hardly. How ludicrous! Praise means the most when it is delivered spontaneously in a timely fashion regardless of the person's age. If you find yourself withholding praise from staff, look inside and ask yourself why. It's not healthy for either you or your employees. What do you have to do to overcome this less than desirable trait?

3. Asking someone's opinion

People love to be asked what they think about things. Don't you? Make this a regular habit as you meet formally with staff, circle the physical environment, and eat lunch with a small group. It shows you care about others' ideas and beliefs. It shows you aren't narcissistic enough to "buy" that only you have the right answers to problems. It shows you are open to lots of input from many different sources. Most employees respond very favorably to this type of management style. Use it daily. Every time you ask a person what he thinks, you communicate to him that you value him: his skills, his creativity, his insights. It's actually a way of paying huge compliments to your staff.

4. Taking ten minutes to really listen

When you know that one of your people is struggling with a big problem at home, invite her to talk candidly with you about it behind closed doors. Why? There are multiple benefits to doing so. First, you demonstrate empathy. Second, you allow her the opportunity to release some of the pressure cooker feeling she's bottling up. Third, she goes away feeling heard. Fourth, she probably winds up being more productive on the job than if you pretended the situation wasn't happening and shut her out. Again,

clients often tell me they don't have the time for such listening, such setting aside of their daily responsibilities. Know without a doubt that this is part of your responsibility too. As a manager, you have an obligation to show empathy when it's called for, and you have a duty to do whatever is necessary to shift the employee into a new place so she can continue to work effectively. If you fail to do this, you lose, she loses, and the company as a whole loses.

5. Establishing eye contact

As you talk with people, look them straight in the eye. We aren't promoting staring and making the other person uncomfortable. We're simply saying that you need to look directly at folks so they feel valued and heard. Focus on that individual as if she was the only person in the world at that precise moment. When you let your eyes dart around the room or you look down at the floor, you subtly communicate a lack of interest, lack of seriousness, or even a disrespect for the person. That kind of behavior is a turn off to others. Consider how you feel when someone avoids your eyes during conversation. You get the feeling that he doesn't really care what you have to say, right? Is that the message you wish to convey to your staff?

6. Building someone's self confidence

This can be accomplished in lots of ways. Think both inside and outside the box. Let people know you believe they can do the task or project. Tell them they are on the right track. Communicate to them that you implemented their ideas. Send them an email explaining how they made you shine in front of your own boss and how that made you feel. Let them know you absolutely trust them to carry on in your two day absence. Things like this. Incorporate these into your daily routine. Feel awkward doing it? Why? Don't you appreciate it when people build you up, believe in you, stretch you, congratulate you? Do an honest assessment and make sure you aren't a person who wants the confidence building efforts flowing only your way.

7. Conducting cultural assessments and/or staff satisfaction surveys

Whether you have money to spend on an outside party or you're in the position to have to handle it internally, make sure you integrate one or both of these on an annual basis. Don't assume you fully grasp the culture of your organization. Remember that your lens is limited. Seek that unfiltered view. This takes some courage, but you need to do it unless you really want to walk around in a comfortable fog. Walking around in a delusional fog is not what you as a manager are getting paid to do. So step outside that comfort zone.



Risk finding out how your staff really feels about you, the organization, the environment, each other.

You can't fix something that you don't know is broken, tarnished, less than satisfactory. Be sure to utilize a process that protects people's anonymity and encourages their candor, especially if you are trying to do this yourself. To end up with fluff that isn't useful and just makes you feel good defeats the purpose of the whole exercise. Well done survey and assessment results may make you squirm here and there. But they are a great spring board for growth.

8. Providing opportunities for staff to enhance their health

This could mean letting employees leave an hour early once a week for a nutrition class, exercise program, or other fitness initiative. It may mean rewarding people for losing weight over a certain period of time. It could mean treating staff to a healthy, delicious lunch once a month. It could mean offering smoking cessation classes. Maybe it means opening a fitness center on site or providing dollar benefits toward an established community program. Be creative. Get input from the staff. See what ideas they generate. If you have their buy-in, you're more likely to see positive behaviors and positive results. Healthier employees is a huge win for you and the organization as well as for them as individuals. Don't underestimate the value here.

Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, once said that managers need to be hard headed in business but soft hearted when taking care of people. You're probably already focused enough on getting the job done; maybe it's time to direct some focus to developing ways you can demonstrate to your staff that you truly care about each one of them.

⌘

Sylvia Hepler
Executive Coach and Advisor
Sylvia@LaunchingLives.biz
717-761-5457



get unstuck. . . create a new story