

It's The People . . . stupid (cont'd)

HUMAN-SIDE MANAGEMENT:

Part II: Managing within the framework of rules and regulations.

“Often, the difference between corporate success and corporate failure depends very largely on the extent to which conflict between people is outweighed by cooperation. The essence of the management function is the effort to build an effective team on the solid foundation of mutual interest.”

The above passage is contained in a series of three-ring binders tracking arbitration and company labor relations policy at one of the big-three Automakers in the United States. Every effort has been made to give the individual responsible for this insightful quote proper credit. Alas, to no avail. It is known to be from a former Vice President of the Auto Company and probably dates to the early years of labor relations. However, when the company is asked about the quote and told where to look, they disavow any knowledge of the binders. The mysterious ‘Brown Books’ are that secret. These binders are considered more secret and confidential than new model designs. Anyway, the source of this insightful quote is unknown but it does reflect the true function of the manager with people responsibility.

In essence, regardless of job location, whether it is in a high-rise office or on a factory floor, your job as a manager of people is unique. The work you perform is different from those you manage. You direct their work. You don't do their work. Your organizational subordinates are your coworkers with whom you can be friendly but who are not your friends. The day you become the ‘boss’ your relationship with those you supervise is forever altered and will remain that way so long as your superior-subordinate relationship remains. This is particularly important to those who are promoted from within the organization.

The same can be said of your new status as a ‘member of management.’ Your obligations are now to the company. The decisions you make are considerations of that which is in the best interest of the company. You have become a pillar of the organization and you are representing your company and yourself twenty-four hours a day, seven-days a week, fifty-two weeks a year. Or at least that should be your mind-set. You, each one of you, are the company. You set the example.

Think, if you will, about the employee who goes to the local bar every Friday after payday and drinks him or herself into a reputation of being a drunkard with a drinking problem.

Your employee is on his or her own time and, while you may be concerned, you do nothing about it, after all, it's on their own time and does not affect their on-the-job performance. You, on the other hand, are a manager. You do the same thing. Every Friday you go to a bar and drink heavily. Your employees know of the situation, talk and

joke about it and most probably you lose their respect. Or worse, you may have just become one-of-the-boys, a 'drinkin' buddy. Your manager is no dummy. He too knows about your binge. Like your subordinate, it did not happen on company time or premises. But here things change. Is this a habit? Do you have a drinking problem? As a boss, should your judgment be questioned? Do you have a problem? Should closer tabs be kept on you at work? While it hasn't affected your work yet, when will it start? Do you favor your 'drinkin' buddies on the job? Your boss now thinks about all these things. You have just cost yourself a reputation, which will be particularly difficult to live down. You are a manager and are judged by your actions.

Is this scenario unfair? Should you be looked at any differently than you look at your employees? While you may consider it unfair, it's a fact of life. You are different from those you manage. You are measured on a different scale than those you manage. When you accepted the mantle of leadership, you agreed to step up to the responsibilities of being a leader. The responsibility is to set the example, to lead, to represent, to be the company, and that is a twenty-four hour a day, seven-days a week, fifty-two weeks a year commitment.

As a manager of people, you need to control the actions of your subordinates on the job, to oversee their performance against your standards, discipline when necessary, and terminate when justified. If you really believe you can be friends with your employees, wait until that first time you have to discipline or maybe terminate a friend. Terminating a friend is the hardest thing you will ever have to face as a manager of people. Termination is difficult at best; termination of a friend is next to impossible and is often only completed when it is seen as a condition of your own future employment. When your own job is on the line, you have to make that decision of whether to terminate or discipline a friend, and risk that friendship, or be terminated yourself for failure to manage your people.

All too often, management's best source of promotable people is internal good performers. They take the best performer in a given job and appoint him or her to a supervisory position. More regrettably, many companies do not train that employee in what it is to supervise. It's almost like blessing the individual for attaining the great honor of becoming a manager and not letting them in on the secret. When that untrained person fails, as inevitably untrained people do fail, the company has not only lost a supervisor but, because that individual was promoted out of a position in which he or she had excelled and demonstrated superior skills on the job, the company has also lost one of the best performers in the group.

Very few companies demote; fewer still are the employees willing to take a step backward and admit they failed as a leader. No matter how you look at it, that's a double whammy that will cost untold dollars for replacement and on-the-job training.

As an aside, to be perfectly honest, larger companies can and do train supervisors/managers either on-the-job, with a mentor, or in formalized training classes. Somewhere, at some point, companies of a certain size believe formalized training cannot

be justified and forego any training of supervisors. These experienced managers must believe the new supervisor/manager will succeed if they just emulate their superiors, training by osmosis, or a risk of bad management begetting bad management. Smaller companies, particularly the entrepreneur, may name managers and never expect them to manage. Entrepreneurs tend to not want to yield control over anything and find it difficult to let managers manage.

However, if we accept the primary premise that the responsibility of people managers is the people they manage then we are obligated to somehow teach managers how to manage their people. We need to do that before we teach them how to read a productivity chart or the financial statement. Only if managers of people understand the parameters of their job, if they know how to do their job, if they know what is expected of them, then, and only then, can they be held responsible for doing the job.

Wow! That may be a novel approach: training the people how to do the job, informing them of what is expected, making sure they understand, and then expecting them to perform. If that can be accomplished, all other things being equal, a manager can operate a function under the constraints of any rule, regulation, policy, or law.

Can the same be said for those we manage? Absolutely! If we train our subordinates in the job, provide them with the tools necessary, and they understand what is expected of them, then you, as a manager, have every right to expect that person to perform the job. Failure to perform up to expectation once the expectations are known is grounds for discipline, including termination, within the confines of the rules, regulations and the law. No Title VII claims, no wrongful discharge, no unemployment claims (in many states), no nothing. Oh, those troublesome cases may still occur occasionally; there are ambulance chasers in employment law as well. But manage your discipline correctly and those cases will fail to establish prima facie evidence and will be thrown out. That is taking responsibility for management and managing within the framework of rules, regulations and laws.

Next month's Human-side Management update . . .

Part III: The laws, rules, regulations and other self-imposed restrictions to managing.

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