Management School of Hard Knocks - The Deepest Learning - 14122

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ABSTRACT

Sometimes being a manager feels like being caught between being mommy to complaining staffers and being a juggler to handle everything the bigger boss wants: strategic program development, line management, program management, corporate citizenship.

I stepped into management after twenty-five years of technical work and project management at a National Laboratory. The pull into "people management" came only when I realized that the people I worked with needed a leader with significant technical understanding, passion for the mission, and belief in the quality of the people performing the work. In short, someone who cares.

At first that caring went a long way. Management surveys conducted each year as part of our Quality Assurance program showed a significant upturn in results. The workforce that showed great discontent prior to my promotion turned into a happy contented workforce during my first several years as a manager, and customer satisfaction was also good during those years. Then the fourth year management survey results came in. The rapid descent into dissatisfaction was stunning. The number of written comments was at an all-time high, and most of them, while guarded, were directed at me.

So what went wrong? How can I understand what this downward trend really means, and how can it be corrected? A couple years of examination have led me to some conclusions, and I have already begun to implement some significant changes that I expect will stop the downward spiral.

There are many training opportunities available to help managers develop skills for managing the diverse group of people who make up their work force. I have taken many of them and still find myself stumbling: it seems that the deepest learning comes through the school of hard knocks. The biggest lesson is that mistakes are to be embraced as learning opportunities, which is my motivation to share this journey.

INTRODUCTION

Managers interact daily with individuals who have distinct needs, wants, and expectations. The manager's attitude significantly influences the attitudes, performance, and satisfaction of the staff. But as any manager can attest, the stress of trying to lead and satisfy so many competing priorities and expectations can be overwhelming. Trying to be both firm and caring at the same time can be entirely unsatisfying and leave a manager feeling inadequate in his/her role. But the

truth is that working with people means working with emotions. And the bottom line is that staff want a supportive, caring manager who has their best interests at heart. Managers with empathy are better able to understand their employees' needs and provide them with constructive feedback that will in turn inspire and motivate them.

Control Your Emotions

The manager must control his or his/her emotions at all times, which is not to say that a manager should check his/her emotions at the door, but rather, she must balance his/her emotions and display appropriate behavior for any given situation. An overly emotional manager may appear *soft* while the converse may appear rigid and unapproachable. Managers that successfully regulate their emotions are better able to effectively motivate staff and demonstrate compassion and empathy for their employees.

Understanding the emotions of others will ultimately lead to more successful and productive staff members, as is beautifully described in the book *Working with Emotional Intelligence* and several subsequent titles by Daniel Goleman, a must-read for any manager. One of the classic failings of managers, and of employees in general, is a lack of understanding of the emotional aspect of working relationships. Leaders with empathy are better able to understand their employees' needs and provide them with constructive feedback that will in turn inspire and motivate them.

In Stephen R. Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, the author describes seven habits that all successful people exhibit:

1. Be proactive;
2. Begin with the end in mind;
3. Put first things first;
4. Think win/win;
5. Seek first to understand, then to be understood;
6. Synergize (in other words, cooperate); and
7. Sharpen the saw.

While the first three "habits" deal with self-mastery, the second three deal with teamwork, cooperation, and communication, all of the topics are discussed in this paper. The final habit is simply an embodiment of all others to help an individual work toward continuous improvement. Habit #5 is particularly important and is one that managers need to take to heart. Quite simply it means to exhibit empathy. The manager who knows how to stay motivated under stress, motivate others, navigate this complex maze of interpersonal relationships, and motivate and inspire others, will ultimately build more successful teams and gain superior performance results.

Be Inclusive at All Levels

Managers must have the confidence and strength to more fully involve their staff in

decision-making and planning processes. While the manager must always make the final call, including staff in important aspects of the decision-making process contributes to feelings of empowerment, that their voice is being heard, that their views make a difference, and that they are more than just a *cog in the wheel.*

Managers often feel that decisions are theirs and theirs alone to make, and while that might sometimes be true, more often than not, a manager will come to regret that stance. By taking all of the decision-making steps *publicly* (i.e., involving the entire organization) the process not only becomes more transparent, but it also produces better, more satisfying results. This, by the way, is also the answer for consent-based siting of a radioactive waste repository.

An inclusive management style increases ownership and commitment, retains your best employees, and fosters an environment in which people choose to be motivated and productive. Staff are more loyal, feel needed and wanted, feel respected, and feel that their opinions matter. In addition, decisions tend to be better when derived from a wider range of knowledge, information, and experience. In that regard, I have recently increased the frequency of my departmental meetings and solicited more input from my staff on a variety of issues.

Recognize Set Behavior Patterns and Rigid Perspectives
Managers must also learn to recognize set behavioral patterns and rigid views. This is especially important when your staff come from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Some of this behavior is within the norm and is acceptable workplace behavior, but the manager must recognize when it goes beyond that and when it needs to be shut down. This goes for the manager, as well, since management is a two-way street. Self-examine how you deal with your staff. Are you sensitive to the needs of others?

Use Direct Communication

There is no room in management for anything but direct and honest communication between the manager and his/her staff. Managers must communicate in a direct, yet non-threatening manner. Secondhand information nearly always leads to miscommunication and reduced productivity, if not bruised egos and employee dissatisfaction. During a meeting, if a staff member's name comes up who is not in attendance, every effort should be made to call that person into the meeting or the discussion should be tabled until that employee can participate in that particular discussion.

Recognize and Reward

While it might seem obvious that you need to recognize and reward exemplary performance, the manner in which you do this can make a huge difference. Public recognition is often an effective method of rewarding employees; however, managers need also be cognizant of the fact that some employees might be embarrassed by such recognition. Understanding these differences between staff and the manager will be rewarded by more high performance.

It is also important to avoid discounting the impact of the small things, the little *thank you* notes, tickets to the theater, or even something so simple as an email reply that says *thanks for all of your hard work*. Recognition, either public or private, motivates staff to perform to their potential, which is all a manager can expect.

Knowing When to Let Go

Up until this point, I have discussed methods of inspiring and motivating staff through empowerment, empathy, inclusion, recognition, honesty, and directness. However, sometimes as hard as we may try, we still have performance issues. Poor performers can literally destroy an organization, like a virus infecting its host. Besides the fact that they don't contribute, low performers:

- Decrease the morale of the team or the organization;
- Create tension within the team;
- Waste the manager's time and energy;
- Represent a liability to the organization; and
- Waste the organization's budget and other resources.

The manager must first recognize that this underperformer is inherently unhappy in his or her job, and he or she may be waiting for the manager to take some action. The manager must take action quickly before the virus spreads throughout the rest of the organization. Don't wait until the next performance review to deal with a problem employee. This is a situation where upfront time, energy, and planning is essential.

The manager must consider what their role is in the employee's dissatisfaction and determine if they have done everything they can to inspire and motivate their staff. Is the employee overwhelmed? Dealing with a family crisis? Upset that he or she did not get a promotion? Understanding the root of employee dissatisfaction is important in order to determine if this is something that can be improved or if the relationship is beyond repair.

When all avenues have been exhausted and it is apparent that the employee will never be a productive member of the team, regardless of what the manager does, it is imperative that the poor performer be removed from the organization as quickly and with as little fanfare as possible in order to avoid bringing down the entire organization. There is only so much that a manager can do, and there comes a point where excessive focus on one or two employees can disrupt the entire group. Don't let that happen!

CONCLUSIONS

The last couple of years have been a painful period of growth for me as a manager. It is difficult to look back and say that I did anything wrong, but I knew that I needed to change some things in my

management style, as well as recognize certain behaviors in my staff, that might be contributing to the downtrend in employee satisfaction. Becoming more self-aware, displaying more empathy for my staff, and more effectively managing my workplace relationships has allowed me to move forward after a tough couple of years. While these are things that came natural to me early in my managerial career, I somehow lost it along the way. Now I am refocusing my efforts on improving my people skills and making the changes needed to have an effective team.

REFERENCES

1. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen R. Covey.

2. *Working with Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman.