



MCHRMA RESOURCE

Minnesota Counties Human Resource Management Association

Being Flexible Doesn't Mean Letting Employees Walk All Over You

Author: Joan Llyod , Joan Lloyd & Associates, Inc.

Date/Source: Spring 2008 Personnel Peeks (Reviewed October 2009)

Archived newsletters of the Personnel Peeks publication can be found on the MCHRMA site.

Q: Dear Joan:

I was reading your "Five Deadly Management Sins" on the Bizjournals.com Web site. I am suffering (actually more like committing management suicide) from your second point: Leadership through friendship. I seem to think that my employees will see how hard I am working (13- to 15-hour days), and they will be grateful for my flexibility with them ("Sure, no problem if you come in late") and they will step up with the same effort. However that has not happened. They still wait for me to finish everything. At my last job, it was much easier to get people to step up and take responsibility. My advice on what to do, or is it just to be more demanding with my staff? I'll probably be unemployed shortly because of this.

A: You've heard of management styles such as "management by walking around" and "the one-minute manager." Your management style seems to be "Motivation through guilt and gratefulness."

You may protest, "Hey, I'm a nice guy bending over backward for these people! I'm not using guilt or gratefulness! I'm just a good role model." Yes, you are a good role model and you are trying to be flexible about their work/life balance. But you left out some very important components in the employer/employee contract: they get paid for meeting your quality and quantity standards and producing good work for the company. The problem is your standards seem to be "Kids, give me all your homework and you run outside and play."

What you are starting to realize is that motivating through guilt and gratefulness usually backfires. You work like a dog and let everyone else off the hook with no expectations or consequences. You become the long-suffering, stereotypical parent complaining about getting no respect. You make it too easy for your employees to treat you like a doormat.

Somewhere along the line, you must have formed some negative perceptions about the role of a boss. Without sinking too deeply into the psychiatrist's couch, let me guess that you may have had an authority figure in your life - a demanding father, or a demeaning coach, perhaps — who made you vow never to be like him. Or, maybe you had a really wonderful manager in your past, who coached and mentored you, and whom you vowed to emulate. In either case, you've got a few wires crossed when it comes to managing others.

First, you need to work on your underlying perceptions about leadership. Good leaders do set high standards, give honest but caring feedback and coach and push people to do their best. Do their employees think these leaders are dictatorial power mongers? No. These are the leaders people want to work for; they hilt challenge them, teach them new things and make them proud of the work they accomplish.

When an employee doesn't finish a project, a good leader doesn't take it back and do it for him. The leader finds out what the struggle is and coaches the person to find a way to solve the problem and learn from it.

If an employee wants to leave early and wants to dump the task on you or others, a good leader sees that as irresponsible and will tell that employee he can have a flexible schedule, but only if the work is done well and on time and it doesn't inconvenience others.

If you are going to turn this around, you will need to signal a change to your staff. Have a one-on-one with each person and give them honest feedback about what their past behavior has been and then explain changes you expect to see. It's OK to take some personal responsibility and admit you have been too flexible in the past. Explain that you aren't seeing the results you expected, so a change has to be made.

Then, stick to your guns. At first you maybe tested, to see if you are all talk. Insist that they finish their own projects, come in early when necessary, and only come in late or leave early on an exception basis. You can still be flexible, but don't be the overly permissive dad. The work comes first. It's time for them to do what they are paid for and time for you to do some work/life balancing of your own.

Joan Lloyd is an executive coach, management consultant, facilitator and professional trainer. E-mail your question to Joan at info@joanlloyd.com. Visit www.JoanLloyd.com to search an archive of more than 1200 of Joan's articles.

Reprinted with permission from the Minneapolis-St.Paul Business Journal

The viewpoints expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the views or policies of MCHRMA or MCIT. Information contained in this publication is for general information purposes only and does not constitute legal or coverage advice. Duplicating this resource without the written consent from MCHRMA and/or the author is in violation of federal law.