

Managing People: Do I Look Like A Person Who Cares? I Hope So.

(Main article, July 07 "Tips For Today's Managers")

by Larry Johnson

A friend of mine, I'll call him Paul, recently went through the pain of a divorce. He came home one day to discover a note from Julie, his now ex-wife, saying she was unhappy and wanted out. In subsequent conversations, she told him that she'd grown tired of his bullying manner, the fact that he never listened to her, and that he always had to have his way."

Paul hadn't seen it coming. It never occurred to him that she perceived him this way. In fact, he said, she never complained about the way they communicated at all, so he assumed everything was fine.

Julie, a school teacher, is shy, soft-spoken, and sweet-natured. Paul, on the other hand, is an extremely gregarious, outgoing and aggressive engineer/manager for a large, multi-national electronics company.

One never knows what really goes on in a marriage, but on the surface, it appears that this was a classic case of opposite personality styles clashing. Paul's aggressive, take-charge approach to life clashing with her lack of confidence and disinclination to speak up. What's worse is that these style differences tend to exacerbates each other. Aggressive types like Paul will often make a decision and dictate it to their partners. "Let's go to Fredo's tonight for dinner honey. You call them and make reservations for 8:00PM and I'll meet you there?" They usually will interpret lack of protest from the other person as agreement, so when she replies in a less-than enthusiastic tone, "Ok," the Pauls of the world assume she's on board with the decision.

Meanwhile, passive types like Julie often think that since they weren't asked, their opinion is not valued, so they nod in agreement, but seethe with resentment inside. Repeat these kinds of encounters day after day, with no push-back from her to let him know he's being a bully, and no inquiry on his part to find out how she feels, and eventually, the relationship will sour. (Ironically, it was probably this extreme difference in personality styles that attracted them in the first place. Mother

Nature likes to mix up the gene pool by having opposites attract.)

For Julie, the underlying message sent by Paul's behavior is, "You don't care about me. If you did, you'd ask my opinion, value what I had to say, and consider my feelings in making a decision."

For Paul, he just doesn't have a clue. He thinks everything's hunky dory until she leaves.

"So," you ask, "what's all this have to do with managing people?"

Everything.

In their 2001 best-seller, *First Break All The Rules: What The World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*, Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman published some remarkable results of studies they conducted at the Gallup organization. They came upon a list of twelve critical perceptions that employees have of their jobs that have statistically significant impact on their teams' levels of profitability, productivity, customer satisfaction ratings, and employee turnover rates. Two that jumped out at me are:

- o My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person.
- o At work, my opinions seem to count.

In the study, the more people answered "agree," and "strongly agree," to those two statements, the higher profitability, productivity, and customer satisfaction ratings went, and the lower employee turnover went.

When I discuss the first statement, "My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person," in my management seminars, most participants agree that it's important that employees feel like you care about them. But they often think that just means asking an employee if her son made the Little League team, or being willing to adjust the vacation schedule to accommodate a family emergency. And, in deed it does.

But real caring goes beyond such niceties. Real caring means things like, "I'm truly interested in you, and what you have to say - how you feel about company decisions; are you content with your working situation; do you feel like you're getting a fair

shake here?”

Which leads to the second statement, “At work, my opinions seem to count.”

When you take the time to inquire, and truly consider what employees have to say, they start to feel like you really do care. One statement complements the other.

In an article in the Harvard Business Review, (January-February, 2001) Commander D. Michael Abrashoff described how, in the course of eighteen months, he managed to convert one of the worst-operating ships in the Navy, the USS Benfold, into an award-winning centerpiece of the Navy's top performers. When he took command, there was poor crew performance, and the ship's turnover rate was one of the highest of any ship in the Navy. Abrashoff spent his first days wandering among the crew asking them to tell him what they thought was wrong and to offer suggestions for fixing problems.

After listening carefully, he assigned teams to develop and implement those suggestions for improvement. According to Commander Abrashoff, he tackled the problem in this way because he really had no idea what to do, and he figured the only logical approach was to ask the crew for advice since they were closest to the problems. The simple act of listening not only gave him the answers he needed but also, he later realized, inadvertently stimulated the spectacular turnaround in morale and performance. “Once they knew I was truly interested in what they thought, the suggestions and ideas started rolling in and the morale started shooting up. (Absolute Honesty: Building A Corporate Culture That Values Straight Talk And Rewards Integrity, by Larry Johnson & Bob Phillips, AMACOM Books, New York, New York, 2003, p. 47.)

So, what should you ask your employees that will convey that you truly care AND improve your business. How about these for starters:

- o What are we doing that we should stop doing?
- o What are we not doing that we should start doing?
- o What are we doing that we should keep doing but improve?
- o How should we go about improving it?

Commander Abrashoff found that asking these kinds of questions was just the ticket for turning things around on the USS Benfold. Had my friend Paul been willing to ask similar questions of Julie, and been truly willing to listen to the answers, perhaps he would still be married.

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