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Respectable Suggestions for Winning Workers' Esteem

Managers' misconceptions can drain productivity.

The notion of respect is basic. But too often, managers misunderstand or neglect it—with unhappy consequences.

Failing to elicit respect from employees can threaten productivity by leading to interpersonal conflict and unnecessary stress. Respect is critical in the workplace because every person—manager and employee alike—needs to be valued as a person, as well as for his or her work.

Unfortunately, respect between managers and employees seems to be in short supply these days. Human resources professionals spend hours mediating conflicts that are often simple breakdowns in basic respect.

Many managers have these misconceptions about respect:

- Managers are entitled to respect simply by virtue of their position. This couldn't be further from the truth. Respect is earned, not bestowed by title, salary or seniority.
- Workers are primarily motivated by money. While money is important, surveys of workers repeatedly show that appreciation ranks as a much higher need.

If you want your employees to respect you, you must take the initiative in showing that you respect and value them. As a leader in your organization, you set the pace for how this type of value can be shown.

The vehicle for communicating this respect and value to each person is a meaningful relationship. It's the kind of relationship that requires a significant investment of time and effort on your part. But the payoff for you and your employees is so big it will seem well worth it in the end.

The keys that unlock respect and value in your employees can be found by practicing these principles:

- Value people over tasks.
- Invite communication.
- Create choices.

Value People Over Tasks

As a manager, you're given authority to make decisions and direct behavior. That authority can be an asset or liability, depending on how you use it.

Let's look at a hypothetical example of a manager who uses authority poorly. We'll call him Dan.

Dan manages 12 people who test, package and ship his company's product. Management expects Dan's team to stay on schedule. Dan makes rounds several times a day to check on his people, rarely talking with them about anything except efficiency problems. He's known as a perfectionist who lacks social skills, but people higher in the organization like his productivity.

Dan may get the job done, but he devalues his employees by treating them like machines. In turn, his workers are discontented in their jobs, and feel disdain for him.

Dan likes being in authority, and he strictly enforces the rules of the workplace hierarchy. The only thing his employees respect about Dan is that he has the ability to fire them. So they comply with this treatment.

But imagine how much better the same work situation could be if the manager took a few minutes on a regular basis to deliberately build a relationship with each of his employees. As a manager, you can use your authority to level the playing field and extend value to your employees. Here are some practical ways to do this:

- **Take interest in their personal lives.** Remember that employees have lives outside work. Ask about family, interests, hobbies and so on. Follow up on things they've told you, such as a family member having surgery.
- **Step down from the pedestal.** Admit when you've made a mistake. Be willing to apologize or disclose a shortcoming. This lets your employees see you as a real person, instead of merely "the boss."
- **Give praise.** Look for opportunities to genuinely affirm and compliment employees' work. Be specific in your praise. For instance, "I really appreciated you working an hour longer than usual to get that shipment out on time."

When you consistently show your people that you value them as more than a means to getting the work done, you'll have employees who are more eager to do the work.

Invite Communication

Most communication in the hierarchical "one-up, one-down" relationship flows from manager to employee in the forms of directives, training, reviews and memos. This may be practical, but if it's the main form of communication between a manager and employee, it won't foster an optimal working relationship.

Respect implies that the employee is given opportunities to communicate, too. And the way you respond to employees' attempts to communicate speaks volumes about respect.

Encourage employees to approach you with questions, concerns and suggestions. Keep in mind that some workers find this difficult because of your authority, so treat their concerns with importance. Listen attentively, ask follow-up questions for greater understanding, and express appreciation for their courage, time and effort in talking with you.

Ask your employees how their jobs could be more satisfying and efficient. Seriously consider implementing any suggestions they give you. And if you do so, be sure to tell the employee who gave you the suggestion.

By listening to employees and extending respect to them, you make them feel empowered. Empowered employees take greater responsibility for their jobs and how they fit into the company. As a manager, that's exactly what you want - and you haven't had to demand it from them.

Create Choices

Giving employees choices is another way of extending respect. Choices foster a sense of control over their circumstances. This is the concept behind the popular policy of flexible hours or "flex time." It gives employee greater choice within the structure of the workplace.

For instance, suppose an employee approaches you with a suggestion to improve her job. In return, you could invite the employee to implement the suggestion for a period of time. Let her make the necessary choices to see if it will work. This communicates that you trust the employee's judgment, which is vital to a healthy relationship.

The choices you offer can be large or small. For example, you could let your employees:

- Solve problems without your input
- Choose the food offered at a luncheon
- Decide who takes certain responsibilities on a project

The possibilities are endless. When employees act responsibly with the choices given, a manager should create and encourage more. This promotes creativity, self-direction and initiative.

Respect is like a boomerang—throw it as far as you can, and it eventually circles back to you.

In a fast-paced business world, we love techniques that give immediate results. The practices for earning respect won't result in quick fixes to workplace problems. But they are powerful ways for you to give your employees the value they deserve as people, and for you to get the respect you deserve as a responsible manager.

Source: Gilles, G. (Reviewed 2018). Respectable suggestions for winning workers' esteem. Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.

Ask Your EAP!

The following are answers to common questions supervisors have regarding employee issues and making EAP referrals. As always, if you have specific questions about referring an employee or managing a workgroup issue, feel free to make a confidential call to the EAP for a management consultation.

Q. I have two very smart employees who are constantly in conflict with each other. I hesitate to refer them to the EAP to resolve their issues because I think they will manipulate the EA professional, who may not be a match for their ability to manipulate. Should I refer anyway?

A. Your employees may not be motivated to resolve their differences, at least not yet. Their sense of urgency to deal with the issues between them will not be greater than a consequence for remaining in conflict and interfering with workplace productivity. Like many supervisors, you hold significant leverage and the ability to influence them toward the goal all three of you share. The question is, how long will you continue to tolerate the problems between them? It is easy to unwittingly reinforce this sort of dysfunction between workers by asking for change, pleading, coaxing, and meeting in private to “get serious” but without truly holding workers to account. So without taking a stand and deciding on an effective consequence, you can expect the problems they are experiencing to continue indefinitely. Start by meeting with the EAP alone, and decide on a plan you can live with, then refer.

Q. Is there research that points to marijuana’s adverse effect on productivity in the workplace? Most people know about the impact of alcoholic workers and the high costs associated with alcohol abuse. Cannabis does not seem to have the same amount or degree of information.

A. Research on the adverse impact and cost of cannabis use in the workplace exists, but it is not as plentiful or as widely shared as research on alcoholism and alcohol abuse. This is explained in part by the large difference in research funding related to alcohol abuse and alcoholism and the length of time such funding has been available. Additionally, there is no “alcohol lobby” with a substantive goal of discrediting alcohol research, unlike the marijuana lobby, which actively seeks to discredit unfavorable research on cannabis. A 2020 research study on the adverse effects of marijuana use in the workplace showed that cannabis use before and during work negatively relates to task performance and organization-aimed “citizenship behaviors” (willingness to help others), and it contributes to counterproductive work behaviors. The study was published in “Group and Organization Management Journal” May 2020.
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1059601120917590>

Q. I think most employees don’t like hearing negative feedback, even if they are sitting calmly and listening to it. This awareness, in my opinion, causes supervisors to avoid giving feedback or even avoid annual reviews. This is not fair to employees. Any tips for this problem?

A. Few employees enjoy negative feedback, but your goal as a supervisor is not to make negative feedback painless but to make it understood and effectively communicated so it is useful. Follow these steps. 1) Be sure your employees know the goals and objectives of their position. A complaint commonly heard by EAPs is “I don’t know what my boss wants me to do.” 2) Make corrective feedback tangible and measurable so employees can gauge their progress. 3) Don’t lecture or criticize employees personally. 4) Give feedback soon and often so your employees never “wonder” what you are thinking about their performance. 5) Always mention the positive aspects of an employee’s performance. Doing so will not undermine the corrective feedback. Just the opposite. It will increase your employee’s receptivity to the negative feedback. 6) Discuss what change and success will look like if the feedback is acted on. This gives the employee a specific goal to work toward.

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