

An Early Lesson In Leadership Changed My Perspective On How To Treat Others



Dawnnet Beverly



You won't totally know how you're impacting employees unless you ask them—and your business could suffer.



A few decades ago, I received a call from the president of the company where I was working at the time. The firm's flagship office in New York was not doing so well, and the president asked me to "fix" it. I was young and energetic and already had had some success at the company's Connecticut office. I jumped at the chance to demonstrate those same leadership skills to improve the performance and reputation of the company's most important location.

The problems in New York were fairly typical. The business had grown very fast. There were lots of new employees mixed in with older staff. Service had suffered, and tough competitors had recently entered the market.

The first couple of days, I just observed the team in action. Arms crossed, I spoke to no one. Then I marched into the president's office and reeled off about a dozen recommendations that mostly centered on employee failings. They took too long to answer the phone—five or six rings. And they weren't especially pleasant when they did finally pick up. What if it was a customer calling? In addition—and this really bothered me—they rarely took notes or wrote anything down. No matter how good your memory is, nobody can remember everything. When you forget things, performance suffers.

So, I took action. I spoke to the office managers to let them know what I had decided. Then, I mandated training, saw to it that staffers comported themselves in a professional manner, and authorized a number of other changes. I made my presence felt. Before long, the office was running much more efficiently.

I had fixed the problem, but at what cost? A steep one, it turns out. Much later, one of the senior people in the office pulled me aside and told me that I had hurt her deeply. That she loved the company and felt that I had destroyed her. Probably a lot of people in that office felt exactly the same way.

That moment changed my life. I am so thankful that my colleague had the grace to let me know how my behavior had affected her. As a result, I took a step back and tried to take an honest look at how I had approached the situation.


With hindsight, I concluded that not only should I have taken the employees' feelings into consideration, I should also have solicited their points of view. They certainly had valuable insights into the problems. In addition, I should have made them partners in creating the solution.

Since that day, I have been tapped many times in my career to solve a business problem—a poor performing department or an urgent business crisis—and I have always followed the three basic principles that I learned from that early experience.

- **Be intentional about safeguarding people's dignity.** Recognize that everyone deserves to be treated with respect. Often, it isn't what you say or do, but your intentionality. If you intentionally treat people with dignity, you can have difficult exchanges that are productive, without anyone becoming defensive or the conversation going off the rails.
- **Realize that the existing employees are there for a reason.** Each employee is hired for their skills, talents and ability to do a job. But no job is static. Perhaps the role has evolved over time, and the employee is no longer the right fit. Perhaps he or she has not been managed correctly. Begin by acknowledging the contribution they have made—it's real and deserves recognition. Then, you can move on to next steps. Does the employee need a new job? A

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- **Understand that your perspective probably isn't the only valuable one.** In any corporation, there are a lot of opinions—about everything—reflecting a never-ending array of competing priorities. So, when a decision needs to be made, your position will almost always be one of many under consideration. If the outcome doesn't go your way, it doesn't necessarily mean you were wrong. It just means that your position wasn't chosen. Be at peace with it. The faster you can do that, the faster you will see the value in the opinions of others—even those subordinate to you.



How To Beat B.S.

I believe these principles are more important than ever. Business is far more dynamic today than it was just 20 years ago. We've just been through a global pandemic and the economic environment is uncertain. These are stressful times.

And we have a new generation entering the workforce, GenZ. It might not seem like they take things to heart. But they do! This is a highly competitive, hardworking group that also likes stability, given the world they grew up in. Plus, they are fast learners and very receptive to a more empathetic style of management. These traits could be highly beneficial to employers.

So, give it a try. Managers who emphasize kindness won't just be better people, they will become better and more effective leaders.



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