

Good Staff Management - a Formula for Success

In this article: It is the people that create the atmosphere – good or bad – in a work environment. Managers that make it a positive environment benefit the company and the staff.

Through the years of a long and varied career I have been privileged to be mentored by excellent managers who intuitively understood that you get better results with a positive approach. These men and women taught by example that treating people with respect, no matter what their position, age, intelligence or skill level, pays dividends in cooperation and team building. There have been a few poor managers as well, but those experiences only emphasized the benefits of positive reinforcement as a management style.

While respect should be inherent to all human interactions the dynamics of the workplace present a challenge as well as opportunity to affect our environment in a positive manner. The workplace is unique in that it brings together a group of people with diverse personalities and backgrounds in an atmosphere that is not only competitive by nature, but has an underlying component of fear.

One aspect of working with a mix of personalities is how it affects the collective energy of one department or even the whole company. The energy felt can be noticeably positive, wholly negative or both. How much or how little of either depends on what the staff, individually and collectively, is projecting. One dominant personality, particularly in a position of authority, can lift up or pull down an entire office. The opposite is also true. If the majority of staff is projecting one kind of energy, their collective strength will offset what is being projected by the one, even if that person is the 'boss'. A few examples come to mind to demonstrate how this works.

For a short time I worked in a small company with only ten or so employees. The employees dedicated and hardworking, but also knew the value of fun. We enjoyed chatting and joking with each other and made it a point to have an extended weekly lunch together. In contrast, the owner of the company approached the business of business with sober intensity. In her mind there was no room for fun and frivolity. In this instance the good humour of the ten outweighed her dour approach making it a good place to work for all of us.

Another time I had a long-term assignment in the accounting department of a major retail chain. The mostly young and inexperienced staff members were supervised by a wannabe dictator. This woman would make a deliberate show of looking at her watch when she saw a staff member heading toward the washroom. It was quite apparent that the staff was intimidated and hated working there. They spoke in whispers and then only about the business at hand. A laugh was nowhere to be heard and you could almost taste the negative energy generated by fear. Not surprisingly, the department had a high staff turnover.

The most compelling example of observing the dynamics of a workplace occurred at my last place of employment before taking early retirement. In some ways it was like watching and being part of an unfolding drama with the first scenes set in a menacing forest and then making a slow transition to an open meadow under clear skies. What made it fascinating to watch, and a privilege to be a part of, was seeing the story within the story of one man whose superior leadership changed the lives of many and influenced an industry.

The workplace was made up of a small mix of professionals and support staff. The office was small, cramped and rather dingy. I was hired to replace the office administrator who was leaving after three years. It was not a happy place. The secretary sat at her desk hunched over as if seeking protection. When someone came to the counter for assistance her response was sullen and the help minimal. She had just returned from a six-week stress leave. It didn't take long to find out why.

The hour and a half spent with the person I was replacing was more than enough to see that being in control, down to the smallest details, was an essential component of her management. As I was to find out later she ruled the office and the people in it with the proverbial iron rod. Chit-chat and laughter were forbidden.

The counterpoint to the office administrator making life miserable was the head of the department. He was an extraordinary leader who brought together opposing factions and worked tirelessly to provide mentorship and promote equality. He wore the mantle of authority with quiet dignity and was highly respected in the industry.

Changing the atmosphere that had been poisoned by the former administrator took time, patience and gaining the trust of staff that had every reason to be wary of administration. Using skills learned from my early mentors,

procedures were changed and responsibility delegated. An open door policy invited collaboration and encouraged initiative. The result, particularly when viewed from the point of contrast, was quite amazing. There were staff outings, lunches together and birthdays celebrated. The once sullen and unhappy secretary greeted people with a smile and was quick to offer assistance.

Another example of what 'love in action' looks like in the workplace was provided by a young manager named Branca. A woman in her early twenties had been sent from Toronto for training in the position I held temporarily. Soon after she arrived she became quite ill and I wanted to speak with Branca about her situation. She asked if it could wait as she was due in a meeting in the next two minutes. I told her that, yes, it could wait as it was personal. Branca's response was "Then I have time, let's talk." That evening Branca left work to spend the night with Nancy so she wouldn't be alone and sick in a strange city.

A few months later, when Branca treated me to a farewell lunch, I commented on how extraordinary it was for a manager to go to such lengths for an employee. Her reply was startling and worth repeating. She said that she had grown up in a perfect home with parents who loved and supported her and then had gone on to marry a perfect man and secure a job she loved. Giving back, where and whenever possible, was a way to show gratitude for the life she was given.

Every work place is different with its own set of dynamics created by the people who work there. My experiences have been mainly in an office environment with a few forays into the hospitality industry. In both environments I have found that it is the energy created by 'people at the top'; the ones making policy that impacts how the business functions at the ground level. At the end of the day it comes down to an attitude of respect for oneself that reflects outward and encloses the people around, whether they are subordinates or peers.

*Excerpt from "[Love's Dynamic](#)", a collection of observations on the subject of love and human energy.
by author Norah LeClare*

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