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Valuing Employees

Employees are eager to work hard, but managers need to listen to their needs.

By Noelle C. Nelson

Workers can't perform when they don't know what to do or how to do it. This may seem like basic common sense, yet too often managers unwittingly fail to let their workers know what they expect, or they change what is expected without sufficient explanation. The upshot is, workers are being set up for failure when what they want most is to succeed.

A typical scenario might go like this: Tom walks into his manager's office. He asks his manager about the e-mail he just received announcing a switch over to a new software system that is critical to performing his job. The manager barely looks up from his computer and brushes Tom off, saying he is busy and instructing Tom to reread the e-mail for any details about the new system.

Tom is frustrated by his manager's response, but he tries again to get more information by asking a specific question about how to transfer his files from the old software system to the new one. The manager says it's intuitive and he's sure Tom is bright enough to figure it out himself. Then, he tells Tom he's expecting a conference call and abruptly ends the conversation.

The manager wasn't rude or inappropriate. He simply failed to hear Tom's need for guidance. The manager may have been too busy to help, or he may have believed the software changeover was easy enough for Tom to resolve. Or, the manager's actions were a misguided attempt to challenge Tom to figure things out on his own.

Unfortunately, Tom internalizes his manager's lack of instruction as "I must be really dumb to be missing this," "My manager can't be bothered with me," or some other demoralizing thought. > Tom ends up feeling unappreciated and incompetent, and he senses that his request has no value or that he himself has little value in his manager's eyes.

What does appreciation, which at first may seem to be a nicety, have to do with running a successful business? Everything. Unappreciated employees are more likely to quit, costing businesses billions of dollars every year in recruitment and training. Factor in absenteeism, tardiness, lack of motivation and stress injuries that come with an undervalued workforce, and the immensity of the problem is clear.

Lack of appreciation, in a nutshell, derives from a failure by management to value what is of value to its workers. A worker's desire to do a good job is priceless. It is one of the core components of a successful business. When workers value their ability to do good work enough to ask for guidance, for example, the manager must value that request and deal with it accordingly. Had the manager in the above scenario recognized and valued Tom's need for guidance, the result would have been very different:

Tom walks into his manager's office and says he received the e-mail about the change to the new software. The manager acknowledges his comment but doesn't look away from his computer. Tom asks the manager how he is supposed to transfer his files from the old software system to the new one. The manager mentions the introductory packet with the training module for the new software. Tom says he has read the packet, but it doesn't address the file transfer issue.

Instead of brushing Tom off, the manager instead thanks Tom for bringing it to his attention and says he will contact the information technology department for an answer and will get back to Tom.

The interaction starts the same, and the manager even missed Tom's first request for guidance. However, the manager caught on after the second request, and that led to the manager's giving Tom what was needed—the assurance that specific tools would be forthcoming with which to do a good job. Tom feels valued and heard, and believes he is worth the manager's time and effort to instruct. Not only that, the manager thanked Tom for bringing the problem to his attention. As a result, Tom feels appreciated. He is now motivated to do well and will have the wherewithal to do so. The manager has set Tom up for success.

Setting Up for Success

Employee questions address five basic concerns:

- How do I do this?
- What do I do next?
- When is this due?
- Where is this done?
- Why this way and not another?

Listen for these concerns within your employees' questions and comments. They are an indication that your employees want to do their job well. Don't resent, ignore or dismiss their questions. Instead, answer your workers' how, what, when, where and why questions in a way that will facilitate their performance.

As a manager, you are there to support your workers' performance by valuing not just their finished work, but also their efforts to do their work well.

Listening isn't done with just your ears. Look at your workers when they speak to you and nod your acknowledgment so they know you are hearing them. Looking at people tells them nonverbally that they have value, that they are important. The opposite is equally true: Turning your back on someone while they are speaking is insulting.

If you can't answer your employee's request for guidance or instruction in the moment, write down the request or make notes to yourself as to your next step while the worker is still there. We write things down when we take them seriously. When workers see your effort, their sense of value is reinforced.

Give clear instructions. It is well known that we retain and understand better when we both see and hear information. Give written as well as verbal instructions whenever possible. Write instructions in a one, two, three format, or in brief phrases. Clarity is critical. People either ignore that which they don't understand or they feel intimidated and dumb in the face of it. Workers cannot perform effectively under such circumstances.

This is especially true any time you are making a change from established procedures. Workers will want to compare, even if only mentally, how they are going to go about their work under the new procedure vs. the old. Once again, most workers want to do a good job. Make it easy for them to do so by valuing your workers enough to give them clear written guidelines for the change, including timing, who to contact if they need help and where to find all the requisite materials.

Ask follow-up questions that probe for understanding. Don't assume that workers understand your instructions.

A good way to find out is to ask open-ended follow-up questions such as:

- How do you want to go about X?
- How are you thinking of getting started with X?
- What do you need from me to help you with X?
- What are your thoughts about X?
- How would you like to see X work for you?

Be sure to genuinely listen to your workers' responses and write down whatever needs to be addressed or reviewed.

When you are truly interested in what your workers think, you accord them a place of respect in the company; you appreciate them. Appreciating and respecting your workers generates appreciation and respect from them, which in turn impacts your department's performance and productivity.

Say thank you, and say it a lot. Thank your workers for bringing up a concern and thank them for specific tasks under way as well as tasks accomplished. Thank your workers in ways that let them know you're doing it from the heart, not just patting them on the back.

Be descriptive and specific: "The way you summarized the Edwards proposal in your report was very concise and very helpful; thanks" or "Fixing the output mechanism yesterday got us back on track quickly for the Reinaldi order; thank you." When you let your workers know what is valued and why, their self-esteem and satisfaction in the workplace rise. Their desire and ability to work well increase.

Appreciative comments in the workplace can readily be misinterpreted as attempts to manipulate or as just plain phony. Saying, "You're great" to someone may be heard as genuine once or twice, but not if said regularly. "You're such a nice worker" can feel condescending, and "You're the best" is hard to believe when it's said to many people. In order to be effective, express your appreciation in immediate and focused terms. Global expressions such as "You're great" and "You're the best" are not specific enough.

Personal expressions such as "You're such a nice worker" do not focus on the work. They do not address what was appreciated or of value in the work, and thus are often embarrassing or off-putting to the employee. They are not appropriate in the workplace. It may take you more effort to think of a specific comment, but "Thank you for helping Sarah finish her project" is far more valuing than "You're such a nice worker."

Nurture and support the desire for workers to do their best by setting up their success in every way you can. Your steadfast willingness to value and appreciate will pay dividends by creating an upbeat workplace, better two-way communication, higher productivity and, ultimately, a flourishing business.

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