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Feeding or Starving the Employees

Company leaders repeatedly say something like: "Our employees are our strength" and then set out to starve those employees completely by ignoring them, berating them or treating them like less than full human beings. No leader intends to belittle an employee, but when the leader becomes frustrated by a lack of results from an underling, and especially a continuing failure of expectations, striking out at that employee often seems to be the only option.

I am here to say striking out at employees doesn't work and sets back your company's productivity in direct proportion to the amount of berating inflicted¹. Such behavior stems from not taking time to understand the employee's position. We call this and other such behaviors: 'starving the employee'¹.

Here are some self-evident axioms:

- a. No employee sets out to be a 'bad' employee.
- b. All people (all employees) want to feel they are in charge of items over which they have been assumed to have control or responsibility.
- c. Every² employee has feelings, pride and wants to gain a sense of achievement.
- d. Every employee wants to feel appreciated on the job by being listened to by people important to them, especially their bosses.
- e. Most employees want to achieve success in what they are doing.
- f. Upon achieving success, most employees want to move to the next level of task complexity or challenge.

Canadian employers are mostly unable to fulfill these needs and as a result, a report³ indicates that 61% of the Canadian workforce says they "don't trust what their leaders say".

What's going on?

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1. See *Feeding or Starving the Organization*, W. Caswell, General Store Publishing House, Renfrew ON, 2006.
 2. "Every" can be replaced with "Almost every" since there will be exceptions. However managers ought to ensure that rules that they make do affect most employees and not be lured into making policies for the dysfunctional few, thereby penalizing the good workers.
 3. Canadian Management Centre, in partnership with Ipsos-Reid, 30 Oct. 2012

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What's going on is that employees are not fixed rods or staple supplies. They are delicate individuals with fears, issues and sensitivities – just as you harbor your own doubts or concerns from time to time.

You can dream and fantasize that all employees should be 'normal' but they're not. Each one will have a weak point that keeps interfering with the productivity you would like.

And it doesn't take much to trigger a severe reaction based on the employees' emotional gremlins (sitting in that individual's stomach). If you have doubts, review your own experience over the past month; how often has someone's trigger in your company been ignited? Perhaps more than you would like.

The smart manager instead of 'blaming' employees for being too much of a wuss, will figure out how to work around the 'weakness' to the leader's own and the employee's mutual benefit. Your gain would be a greater output from the employee and the employee's benefit would be a better sense of accomplishment.

And how do you do that? You feed the employees instead of starving them. Feeding or nurturing means: listening when they want to be heard, not when you want to hear. It means validating their concerns as legitimate (rather than imposing your values on the 'whiners'). It translates into giving the annual review on time; not postponing meetings with an employee; not shouting at them when you are angry; not seeking revenge (silence or pouting) when you're upset with them. It entails finding time to be alone with the employee – sharing at least an hour a month with each directly reporting individual.

On the other hand, you must remain firm and fair. One step to achieve steadiness is to bring closure to every event. "Would you bolt these two parts together?" should be: "Would you bolt these two pieces together by 4 pm today and report to me when it's done."

In a few words, people are far more delicate than we would like. If we nurture (feed with appropriate attention) the employee rather than starve, we will be better able to deal with the largest problem of any company anywhere: people who think differently than us – which, of course is everyone else.

Bill