

Why can't we be friends?

As a keen observer of the people management styles I've been thinking about how direct one should be in managing staff and how these relationships should be balanced against the need for empathy, teamwork and cooperation. I suspect what some regard as support others would call an unhealthy focus on "friendship". And what some would call being professional others would call dominating.

What I am referring to here is managing the difference between personal and professional relationships. It's an area where individual responses will be heavily influenced by the supervisor's personality style.

I have longed believed that, just as you get what you pay for, you also get what you ask for. I see most employers dealing adequately with the first point. The second, however, is often blurred in an attempt to encourage and be positive. It can result in avoidance of direct requests which would otherwise leave everyone clear on expectations.

The reality of supervision is that it requires employers and managers to ask their staff to do things they would not otherwise choose to do. A simple example is at calving or lambing. That's when significant work pressures in less than pleasant weather conditions over extended hours means heavy physical work in trying circumstances.

This reality needs to be sustained in all aspects of any job. While sharing the load, offering enthusiasm and delivering competitive working conditions can be valuable strategies to offsetting the less attractive aspects of the job, staff need to have clear explanation of what is required of them to meet the needs of the business. This requires plain speaking, direct requests and recognition that demands may cut across family, leisure or other priorities.

To do this effectively, supervisors must maintain professional boundaries so the relationship can function. Becoming too familiar will hamper progress.

Balancing Work & Wider Interests

Clearly the workplace should allow employees to balance their career with life outside of work. That's not the same as saying their personal lives should dominate the workplace. In recent times I've seen a situations where personal issues have been allowed to find their way into the workplace so the team becomes preoccupied with everything but the demands of the business. This creates an unhealthy environment and one that needs to be kept in balance. If the personal issues facing all staff members are allowed to dominate in any team their impact will multiply to distract the real focus of the business.

There must of course be a forum in which such matters can be brought up. I suggest these should be only discussed in individual meetings between supervisors and their staff individually. This enables the business to offer support or guidance without breaching confidences or professionalism.

Direct Requests

My recommendation, then, is that supervisors develop their skills to make direct requests and clearly express their expectations of their staff. There is no room to be constantly trying to navigate personal preferences, moods and interests of their staff. This will only mean they will please no one in return. Excessive focus on individual needs simply complicates team management, takes the teams focus off the key goals and risks efficiency breakdown.

There are times when you have to say “no” in the interests of the business. Having the wisdom to know when that is the best answer will be a positive investment in a profitable operation that is there to give the greatest good to the greatest number.

These challenges are especially relevant for first time supervisors. Don't risk your ability to achieve this vital outcome by becoming too familiar with your team and tainting what can only work on the long recognised basis of “master and servant”. The reality of leadership is you can no longer be “one of the boys” – and that is for everyone's benefit!

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