

NSMAN

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THE RIGHT STUFF

The role of a manager is sometimes akin to being caught between a rock and a hard place. Foo Yong Han finds out what it takes to be an effective one.

Preside with an iron fist and employees may react negatively. Go easy on them and run the risk of them slackening at their tasks. Yet, at most, striking a balance between being firm and fair is only the tip of the iceberg.

Besides being a personable taskmaster, managers must have the attributes of a negotiator, listener and counsellor.

John Quek, Project Consultant with Worklife Solutions enlightens: “They (managers) should be able to inspire and engage their subordinates, provide guidance in times of crisis and focus on achieving business goals without compromising the needs of employees.”

Acuity is another vital trait managers should possess. Being keen observers will go a long way in facilitating a more efficient and harmonious workforce.

“Look for any drastic changes in employee behaviour, work rate or spike in authorised or unauthorised absenteeism, which are usually indicators of employee moral,” John notes.

If trouble is brewing over the horizon, managers must face the issue head-on, starting with a heart-to-heart talk. During this dialogue, managers should always be open to feedback and lend a listening ear to employees should be given an equal opportunity to express their grievances.

Disputes among employees are another common cause of workplace unhappiness. Settlement of these disputes must be mediated by employees’ direct superiors and done behind closed doors. Any matters pertaining to the disputes should be kept confidential.

The most challenging aspect of management lies in coping with the varying temperament and work attitude of each individual in an organisation. Unfortunately, there are no fixed guidelines for managing such a diverse pool of personnel.

“One golden rule is to treat all employees with equal respect. The Management should articulate expectations to employees in a firm and non-condescending manner,” underlines John.

Under the current climate of economic uncertainty, the coming months will be a challenge for managers in any company or organisation. Such testing times require managers to think on their feet and cope under pressure.

“Managers represent the organisation and how they handle tricky situations will reflect on the organisation. Handle them well and they will gain the trust of employees and improve morale,” concludes John.

Q&A

1. What are some of the obstacles managers face at the modern workplace, e.g. disgruntled employees, underperforming staff, etc.?

(John): In Singapore, I would say is the management of employees’ expectations. Employees’ expectations are shaped by what they perceive as “fair”. Equity itself is usually pegged against the Government’s actions and recommendations. The rising cost of living tends to erode the balance between a reasonable and unfair compensation. What may be reasonable a few months ago may no longer be valid due to the rising inflation. When employees analyze their purchasing power and realize that it is eroded, they will start to feel the pinch and this ultimately affects their morale. Some of them start comparing with their families or friends who are working in other organizations and see if they have been short-changed. If they feel they have been short-changed, problems and cracks will seep in. This is where you may get underperforming and disgruntled employees, and such notions are infectious.

2. In your own opinion, what constitutes a good manager?

(John): An excellent negotiator, listener and counsellor, all packaged in one. An excellent manager should be able to inspire and engage his/her subordinates. A good manager is able to provide guidance in times of crisis and lead by example. More importantly, an excellent manager is able to focus on achieving the business goals without compromising the needs of the employees.

3. What signs should a manager look out for if employees are not working well together with one another or if a particular staff member is demoralised?

(John): Look at the sudden change in the employees’ behaviour, work rate and employee records such as authorized and unauthorized absenteeism.

4. What can a manager do to settle disputes among employees or raise morale if they are demoralised?

(John): Be open to feedback and lend a listening ear to the employee should he/she has any grievances. Always give all parties an equal opportunity to express their grievances and display a partial attitude when dealing with sensitive issues. All disputes

should be held behind closed doors and all matters arising should be kept confidential. If necessary, involve the employee's immediate supervisor to get a better picture.

5. How should a manager handle employees who are hostile to him/her or the company, i.e. subordinates rebelling against an overbearing manager or employees who do not perform up to standard because they perceived the company as mistreating them?

(John): Try to understand the value of the staff to the company. Ask questions such as "Can we afford to lose him/her?" and "Does the employee's supervisors and colleagues find him/her a source of negative energy within the organization?" If the answer is yes for both questions, I would certainly recommend letting the staff go to avoid further disturbance to the organization. A difficult staff can affect the morale of others and if left untreated, you may be faced with a bigger crisis if words get around that the company is "mistreating" the staff. Good reputation is like a sand castle: it takes lots of effort and time to build, but only take a second to crumble. A manager represents the organization and how he/she handle the situation will reflect back on the organization. Grievances are never easy to handle. One has to be tactful and sensitive to all parties involved in the issue. Handle it well, you will gain the trust of the employee and improve their morale.

6. How can a manager apply management techniques to different personality types he/her encounters at the workplace, e.g. the loud, outspoken one who may be on the ball but may be at loggerheads with the management; the quiet one who needs more pushing to speak up and offer suggestions; the average one who meets all requirements but could do more; the downright lazy ones who do not meet work requirements?

(John): Managing and understanding the needs of employees have to be the most complex and paramount issue faced by HR practitioners and managers alike. There are no fixed guidelines to handle different categories of workers despite the differences in their personality and characteristics. Nevertheless, one golden rule is to treat all employees with equal respect. Communicate clearly your expectations to them and be firm, not condescending. Employees who display both attitude and performance problems, never hesitate to undertake necessary disciplinary actions after ample warnings are given.

7. What are the ways a manager can go around setting a good example at the workplace and gaining due respect?

(John): A manager has to be impartial and walk-the-talk. In times of crisis, employees always will look upon the top management for advice and strategic guidance. As a manager, he/she has to be quick thinking to provide the necessary answers and perform under pressure.

8. What can a manager do to raise morale among employees in the event of an economic downturn, pay cut, etc.?

(John): Be honest, upfront about impending events, especially if it is bad news. Once the message is put across clearly to the staff, have an open session with them to empathize their situation. Do not promise anything, except by the fact that you will try your best to assist them. Offer them solutions and alternatives if you cannot assist them directly. Often, a good piece of advice is sufficient. Some employees just need a listening ear, so do ensure that you set aside time to address their concerns.

9. Provide quick tips for managing people well at the workplace.

(John):

- Treat the employees as though they are your family members
- View all employees as an asset to the organization rather than costs
- Have a good performance management system that links performance clearly with rewards
- Create a culture of trust, promote open communication and empower your workers when necessary