

By Calvin Sun

If you're a manager, you depend on your staff to do their work. Their success is critical to your own success. If you can develop loyalty among your staff, you build up a bank of "good will capital" you can spend, when necessary -- such as when those impossible deadlines loom and you have to ask for extra effort. Here are a few pointers to help you build that loyalty.

1 Be initially neutral regarding concerns about a subordinate

Don't throw an employee under the bus when someone outside the department complains to you, agreeing with that person automatically. At the same time, don't assume the person is totally wrong, rebuking him or her, and blindly defending your employee. Listen to the concern, thank the person for alerting you, and say you will check with the subordinate in question. Then do so. In this way, you get both sides of the story.

2 Aim for collaboration

The more you can develop a collaborative relationship with your staff, the better that relationship will be. You and your staff do depend on each other, so try to impress that point on them. Remind them that each of you can (and should) help the other to be successful. Remember the saying "One hand washes the other."

3 Listen to staff concerns

Your staff will have concerns about working conditions, working hours, deadlines, and other matters. You may not be able to resolve them all. However, listen to what they are telling you, because if you don't, you will lower morale. If there's little chance that you can resolve the concern, let them know immediately so that they have a proper expectation. Similarly, if you do succeed in resolving a concern, let them know about it. They may not thank you verbally, but chances are they still will appreciate you for what you did.

When listening to your staff, try to avoid interrupting them to explain or defend a position. Similarly, try to remain even-tempered and think before you speak. Your attitude sets the tone for the whole department. Remember the old saying, (which applies equally to both genders): "A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a prudent man overlooks an insult."

4 Be committed to staff development

Your employees need training to maintain their skills. That training includes hard skills, such as programming and network design. It also includes soft skills, such as how to deliver effective presentations and how to communicate effectively. In fact, those soft skills often are more important than hard skills in determining career success. Make sure your staff receives such training -- and when they're participating in a training session, respect that time. Don't call and pull them out of class "just for a second," because they never will return, and you will have wasted money.

5 Fulfill commitments

If you make commitments to your staff, keep them. Otherwise, you lose credibility and will face lowered morale. When you keep your commitments to your staff, it increases the chances that they will reciprocate and keep their commitments to you regarding work delivery.

6 Exhort, don't belittle

You always want your staff to do more, produce more, finish the project earlier -- and for less cost. So there's often a gap between where they are now and where you'd like them to be. It's better, generally, to exhort them to reach that point. If you criticize them because they're not where you want right now, you may create resentment. Of course, there might be one person who does get motivated by being belittled, someone who says, "I'll show that X\$X# manager" and goes on to perform exceptionally well. The percentages are against you, however, because many others will simply "turn off." It's far better to say, "Here's where I'd like us to be, and I know you can do it" rather than, "How come you're not there right now, you slacker?"

7 When singling out staff in public, do so positively

I'm not saying that you always should praise people publicly. Some people become embarrassed or self-conscious when they're the subject of public attention. But I *am* saying that if you do choose to single someone out in public, do so in a positive, rather than a negative way. The latter will embarrass everyone involved.

When you issue public praise, be brief and specific. Talk about what the person did and why it helped the department, organization, or company. Finally, thank the person. Ironically, the less you smile when praising, the more sincere it sounds. (Of course, you should be sincere to begin with, and you should smile just a little bit.)

8 When giving correction, do so privately

Conversely, if someone messes up, talk to them about it behind closed doors. When doing so, focus on the issue, not the person. Try to avoid words like "you" and "yours." Instead of, "Your program caused the system to crash," consider, "Program xyz [which your subordinate developed and supposedly tested] caused the system to crash." Focus on the actions that caused the problem and help the subordinate learn from the situation so that the same issue doesn't occur again.

9 Serve as a buffer for your staff

Unfortunately, you may run into upper-level managers who insist on micromanaging. They will visit your staff and issue directives that might clash with yours. As a result, your employees will find themselves in an awkward situation, unsure of how to react. When that happens, you must step in and make clear to upper management that the chain of command works in both directions. You wouldn't want your staff going around you to complain to your bosses. Neither, therefore, should the opposite occur.

Yes, stepping up could be hazardous to your career, so be diplomatic and tactful when you talk to your bosses. Focus on the benefits to them on observing the chain of command, rather than criticizing them for disregarding it. After you've had the talk, make sure your staff knows about it. Even though the grapevine probably will have alerted people, it's still good to remind your staff that you have their back.

10 Don't micromanage

Just as your bosses shouldn't be micromanaging, neither should you. If you've staffed your team with competent people (and if you're a first-line technical manager, you have strong technical leads), you should be confident that they know what they're doing. You don't have time to do the job of each member of your team anyway.

At the same time, be alert to clues that you *might* have to step in. Are others talking to you about a co-worker's performance? Are you getting evasive or unclear answers in meetings or conversations? Do you have an uncomfortable gut feeling about a project? In those cases, you might have to take a more active interest in your subordinates' work. However, pick your battles carefully.

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