

ESTABLISHING HEALTHY EMPLOYEE RELATIONSHIPS

Improvement Guide for:

- Leadership and Vision
- Relationship Health
- Trust and Respect
- Loyalty and Commitment

Introduction

If you fail to establish healthy relationships with your direct reports, you stand little hope of playing an effective role in their development. Further, studies indicate that the single most important, non-financial driver of employee retention is the relationship a manager shares with his/her direct reports. In employee development, the messenger is as important as the message: managers who maintain poor employee relationships are less likely to be effective at employee development.

In short, the most powerful lever for improving the performance of your direct reports and reducing the likelihood that they will leave your team is the improvement of the relationships you share with them.

Guidelines

To Remember:

- *It is not about your individual performance anymore, it is about your ability to drive the performance of others.*
- *Every employee is different.*
- *Communication is key.*
- *Friendships do not always translate in good managerial relationships.*

4) Friendships do not always translate to good managerial relationships⁴: Managers on friendly terms with their employees can be very effective at developing their employees. However, managers who establish firm friendships with members of their team are advised to proceed with caution. Establishing loyalties that transcend the workplace not only can create the perception that you are not a fair broker with other members of the team, it can make conversations about performance expectations or actual performance, project assignments, or improving team dynamics especially difficult.

All of the factors discussed in this guide—leadership and vision, relationship health, trust and respect, and loyalty and commitment—are positively affected by successfully engaging in principles concerning the manager-employee relationship:

1) It is not about your individual performance anymore, it is about your ability to drive the performance of others.

Many managers achieve their positions through the individual performance they demonstrated before they entered the management ranks. However, the skill set required for individual achievement differs from that required for management. While the job of the employee is to perform to the best of his/her ability, the job of the manager is to drive performance through others.¹

2) Every employee is different: Each of your direct reports has a different strength, a different weakness, and a different working style. Each most likely wants something different from a manager.² When you create a blanket management style, you may not maximize the potential performance of your direct reports and may create employee resentment.³

3) Communication is key: By clarifying objectives, providing formal and informal feedback, and engaging in open and honest dialogue with your team, you can improve the relationships you share with your employees.

Leadership and Vision

To Remember:

- *Managers who are supportive, enthusiastic, and provide recognition for jobs well done have a greater chance of being perceived as good leaders.*
- *Communicating a vision is only effective if it is realistic; promoting the impossible can cost a manager credibility.*

Your leadership and the vision you communicate to your team play an important role in your ability to effectively develop your direct reports.

Characteristics of good managers are team-focused: creating and enabling on-the-job learning experiences, generating enthusiasm, recognizing the efforts of both the team and individuals, and providing support for your direct reports.^{5,6} In short, managers with strong leadership abilities recognize that it is not about them, it is about their teams.

Source: Learning and Development Roundtable; HR Executive Forum research.

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Leaders also clearly communicate their visions—either for the company or the team—to their direct reports. A vision is above all realistic,⁷ as it adds to a manager’s credibility. By communicating a realistic vision for the individual members of your team and the team itself, you provide context for the day-to-day work in which your employees engage.

Your efforts to actively lead your team and clearly explain your vision are more likely to be successful if you maintain healthy relationships with your direct reports.

Relationship and Health

To Remember:

- *Managers who tailor their management style to individual employees have healthier relationships with them.*
- *Providing open lines of communication in which you speak as well as listen can create employee good-will.*

Every employee, like every manager, is different. Some employees are better performers when they receive constant feedback, others perform best when they are granted significant autonomy. As your job is to maximize the performance of your team, the onus is on you to adjust (within reason) your management style to fit the needs of the individuals on your team. Figuring out the right managerial tactics for the right employee does not have to be a mystery. By asking your employees outright or eliciting feedback on your own performance, you can gauge exactly what your employees need in their manager.⁸ **Caveat:** Adjustments to style should never result in (or be perceived as) unfair treatment. Managers must balance the benefits of individualized style with the necessity of consistency and fairness.

Creating open lines of communication can also improve your employee relationships. While providing informal feedback, recognition, clear project parameters and expectations, and organizational or team goals is important, so too is actively listening to your team.⁹ Receiving and acting upon employee feedback, acknowledging and/or implementing employee ideas, and seeking solutions to employee problems reinforces your credibility as both a leader and an advocate of your team.

Trust and Respect

To Remember:

- *Trust and respect are earned, not granted.*

The key to earning employee trust and respect is to take the unknown out of your relationships—if your employees are unsure of your expectations, perceive you don’t value their contributions or disapprove of their performance, or are unclear about the project parameters on which they are working, the chance of earning their trust or respect is slim. Additionally, your credibility is the foundation of your employees trust and respect in you: any actions that damage your credibility will have an adverse affect on the relationships you share with your employees.¹⁰

Loyalty and Commitment

To Remember:

- *Employees with managers who are very effective at employee development are more likely to stay with and be committed to their organizations, put forth greater discretionary effort, and are more adaptable and dependable.¹¹*

Manager quality has a greater impact on employee retention than any other non-financial factor.¹² You can earn the loyalty and commitment of your employees when you provide steady leadership, clearly communicate your vision, treat your employees fairly and consistently, and earn your employees trust and respect. In short, by serving as an advocate of your employees either within or outside of the team, your employees are likely to become your advocates, as well.

Research Methodology

The information presented in this guide is based on a thorough review of professional and academic literature. Given the diversity of perspectives in these topics, this guide is designed to summarize for managers the existing research available on this topic, rather than to impart a particular point of view accepted by the Roundtable.

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- ¹ Susan Armstrong, "How to Be a Good Boss...and Still Get Results!" *Canadian Chemical News* (1 November 2003). (Obtained via Factiva)
- ² Tim Reisenauer, "Four Ways to Shrink Wrap Your Business," *Everett Business Journal* (1 March 2001). (Obtained via Factiva)
- ³ Amanda Wells, "Staff Loyalty May Be a Relic of the Past," *Infotech Weekly* (25 June 2001).
- ⁴ Renato Tagiuri, "Managing People," *Harvard Business Review* (Jan/Feb 1995) (Obtained via Factiva).
- ⁵ Jim Trinko, *What's a Manager to Do?* (June 2004) (Accessed via Factiva)
- ⁶ Author Unknown, "Management—Taking a Lead," *The Grocer* (12 May 2001), (Obtained via Factiva)
- ⁷ John Humphreys, "That Vision Thing," *MIT Sloan Management Review* (Summer 2004). (Obtained via Factiva)
- ⁸ Armstrong, "How to Be a Good Boss...and Still Get Results!"
- ⁹ Douglas, Max E., "Servant Leadership: An Emerging Supervisory Model," *Supervision* (1 February 2003) (Obtained via Factiva)
- ¹⁰ Armstrong, "How to Be a Good Boss...and Still Get Results!"
- ¹¹ Learning and Development Roundtable, *Engaging Managers as Agents of Employee Development*, Washington, DC: Corporate Executive Board (2003), p. 35.
- ¹² Corporate Leadership Council, *The Compelling Offer Revisited*, Washington, DC: Corporate Executive Board (August 2002).