

## **Managing Without Conflict - 4 Lessons In Good Management From Leave It To Beaver**

A recently viewed segment of the 1950's TV show *Leave It To Beaver* proved a perfect illustration of how managers communicate with their staff and how many times that communication can be a miscommunication leading to a comedy of errors and unintended consequences.

At the beginning of the program, Beaver's teacher gave him a note that she wanted him to take to his mother. His classmates convinced him that if a teacher gives you a note to take home to your parents, it can't be good. So Beaver goes home and speaks to his brother Wally who, of course, confirms that a letter from a teacher can't be a good thing.

The next day the teacher discovers that Beaver did not give his mother the note. When Beaver is asked why he did not deliver the note, he lies and makes up a story about his stove blowing up and his father being sent to the hospital. The comedy moves forward as the school principal finds out about Beaver's father being sick and she sends him some "get well" flowers.

With the continued belief that the teacher's note that should have been given to Beaver's mother would have been negative, Wally types out a fake reply for Beaver to give to his teacher. The basis of this reply is that Beaver will be punished. This further confuses the teacher as it finally comes out that the teacher only wanted to ask if Beaver would play Smokey the Bear in the upcoming safety assembly and the note was for permission. To further complicate things the teacher asks Beaver's mother to come to the school the next day to have a face-to-face meeting.



When Beaver finds out his mother was going to the school, he panics and runs away thinking he is in real trouble. Of course in the final segment of the program the truth comes out and all is well. Unfortunately the workplace is not a TV show and in many instances all is not well and all the problems are not solved conveniently within thirty minutes.

Let's take a look at how this simple family comedy series of the 1950's can relate to the workplace of today and what lessons today's managers can learn from it.

### **Lesson #1: Don't UnderEstimate Your Employees**

Too many times, like the adults of the fifties, management treats their employees like children and managers as the adults. The teacher could have simply gone to Beaver and asked him if he was interested in playing Smokey the Bear instead of writing a note to his mother for permission. Similarly, managers often choose not to include employees in the decision-making process for many reasons that often boils down to underestimating their employees.

Managers often underestimate non-management employees' ability to "see the big picture"; understand what is at stake; or comprehend why a decision was made. Managers commonly dismiss "front-line" workers as simple, one-dimensional laborers that care only about their task at hand. For this reason, managers often feel that they cannot bring an employee in on something until the very end or cannot run something by an employee until that thing has been fully vetted by themselves and other managers.

Under no circumstances should employees, nor their level of understanding, be underestimated. Simply because a worker has not "graduated" to management doesn't



mean they are unable to see the big picture. Even a young child knows when something is wrong with mommy or daddy. Sure, when someone is not a member of the management team, they may not be privy to all of the information that you as manager may have, but non-management employees can still pick up on and understand at a high level what is happening. And no matter what may be happening, trust that they can handle it.

Can you imagine how simple it would have been had the teacher gone up to Beaver in the first place and said, "Beaver, we need someone to play Smokey the Bear next week, otherwise there may be no assembly. I would love for you to play this part"? Excluding instances where issues of confidentiality come into play, it is always better to treat your employees as the aware, intelligent, and emotionally mature colleagues they are and practice full disclosure whenever possible.

## **Lesson # 2: Embrace Transparency**

How many times have you been part of a memo that looks like this?

*"I want to see you in my office on Monday morning at 9 am. Please confirm that you will be there."*

Even worse, how many times have you seen this or a similar message sent out via email on Friday afternoon as the employee is packing up for the weekend? Can you imagine what kind of weekend the employee had given what was going through their mind? Questions such as, "what does the manager want?", or, "what did I do?", and "I'll bet I'm in trouble. I am probably going to get fired!!!" become the focus for the employee when they should be focused on their child's soccer match.

Would it not have been better to send out the email with an explanation of what the meeting was about? Especially if it had nothing to do with a performance issue and was simply to discuss a current project. This is the value of transparency.

Embracing transparency is a clear indication to employees that a manager both trusts and respects them. Transparency is also incredibly important to get employee buy-in and to create cooperative action between workers and management. The more transparent and less enigmatic management is, the less of an opportunity the 2%er has to undermine management through the spreading of misinformation and gossip. This brings a wonderful quote to mind, "Nothing dispels opinion [although you could substitute the word "gossip" here] faster than fact!"

Consider how the entire fiasco with Beaver would have been avoided had the teacher simply been transparent with him by saying, "Beaver, please take this permission form to your mother for signing. I would like you to play the role of Smokey the Bear next week."

### **Lesson #3: Understand How Your Employees May See Things**

A previously posted blog article focused on how important it is for managers to take a moment and see the world through their employees' eyes (go to <http://the2percentfactor.com/blog> and look for "LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS - SEEING THINGS FROM A WORKER'S PERSPECTIVE"). Had Beaver's teacher taken a moment to do this, the entire miscommunication and ensuing course of events would have been avoided. Had the teacher taken a moment to remember back to when she was a student, she likely would have realized that a student receiving a letter addressed to their parent was - more often than not - a bad thing!

Similarly, managers - especially those that have been managers for a long time - often forget what it is like to be a regular ol' employee on the other side of the fence. Managers forget how scary or unnerving it can be to receive that email at 5pm on Friday that says "be in my office first thing Monday morning!" Managers forget how important it is for employees (especially younger ones) to be constantly reminded through feedback that they are doing a good job.

Now, a manager may think they are being efficient by sending an email containing a mere 10 words, and indeed it is efficient. On the other hand, when that simply, innocent



email causes the recipient to experience elevated stress and worry - was your email really effective? The definition of “manager” is the person responsible for planning and directing the work of a group of individuals for the purpose of achieving a specific goal or set of goals. When a worried employee focuses their entire attention on what their manager thinks they did wrong, how effective will that employee be at actually doing their job?

A trait common to almost all highly regarded and respected managers is their ability to see things from the employee’s point of view. When a manager masters this skill, their ability to effectively communicate sky-rockets because the message they send is identical to the message that is received by the employee. There is no opportunity for miscommunication and misunderstandings to interfere with the message.

#### **Lesson #4: Provide A Safe Environment Where Employees Can Speak The Truth**

Notice that when the teacher approached Beaver and asked him why he hadn’t taken the letter to his mother in the first place, he lied rather than tell the truth...that he was afraid. This is a clear indication that Beaver feared what could have happened if he had told his teacher he had deliberately left the letter behind. In other words, he didn’t feel safe telling the truth.

This is common in many work environments where employees may go to great lengths to avoid having to tell their manager the raw truth. Some employees may simply lie, others will deflect blame to their colleagues, and yet others may attempt to avoid the issue altogether. Regardless of how they exhibit it, employees partaking in this behaviour all have one thing in common - like Beaver, they are afraid of what may happen if they approach their manager with the truth. In other words, they don’t feel safe.

What could lead to an employee being afraid to speak honestly to their manager? Interestingly, avoidance of consequences is not one of the top reasons. In fact, many professional employees willingly accept reasonable consequences when they know they



have erred. It is when the consequences are not reasonable that the fear develops. This can be categorized as fear of reprisal.

A top reason that many employees fear approaching their manager with the truth is that they are afraid that their manager will over-react and blow the entire situation out of proportion. Managers like this are easy to spot...or rather hear. When something goes wrong or an employee has made a mistake, these managers are the ones that scream at their employees either behind closed doors or in the middle of the office. These managers habitually express their discontent with the employee's performance by berating them and questioning their intelligence and competence. It is often with good reason that employees don't feel safe in this environment.

A second key reason that employees may not feel safe to tell the truth to their manager is that they know, from past experience, that no matter what happened and why, they will be blamed. Many professionals, managers included, have closely tied their professional competency to their perceived self-worth. When a mistake is made, rather than admit they made the mistake they pass the buck to a subordinate that isn't in a position to defend themselves. By doing so, the manager can protect their self-image and ego. Truthfully, some managers may not even realize they are doing this. They, themselves, may experience so much pressure to perform that they are afraid to tell THEIR boss the truth, that they made a mistake.

Unfortunately, when they don the teflon coat so that responsibility slides off of them and on to an employee, they quickly lose the respect of their team. Employees learn that they will be "thrown under the bus" and therefore do everything they can to avoid such an uncomfortable and unjust situation.

Regardless of the reason why, managers must do everything they can to create a safe work environment where employees are not afraid to come forward with the truth.

Some simple ways to accomplish this (over time) include:

Always listen to the employee keeping confidentiality in mind

Respect how difficult it was for the employee to come forth

Ask the employee what they would like to happen next - what they need from you

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Always close the loop - after taking action, inform the employee that came forward what you did and what the result was so that they know you took action.

Regardless of which lesson is considered as most beneficial to you in your development, one point is abundantly clear. It is critical to treat your employees with respect and trust. Employees are not children that are to be discounted as equals. They are an integral part of the workplace. The more we trust our employees to do the right thing, the more they will in fact do the right thing.

When a manager initiates a project or policy that will directly affect employees, they should seriously consider bringing that employee in at the outset to get their opinion. It will likely surprise many in management how well this process will go and how it will result in needed buy-in.

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