December 1, 2021

4 strategies to help employees step up and be more productive

Sometimes managers need to lead employees to autonomy

What happens when employees want to communicate too much?

No one gets anything done!

Well, it might not be that bad all the time.

But many teams face setbacks when employees ask the boss every little question, relay too much information or seek constant feedback.

While you want to help sometimes, leaders also need to guide employees to autonomy.

"Managers need to facilitate their team members' independence," says Maura Thomas, a trainer and author of the *Empowered Productivity™ Book Series*. "This is especially important if your team is not physically together, because 'quick questions' sent through team chat channels can otherwise be endless."

Here are Thomas' four strategies to help employees step up so you can all move on.

'Close' the door for a bit

An "open door policy" sounds kind and welcoming ... and can quickly become cruel and ineffective.

Yes, managers need to be available to work with employees in-person and online. But an open door policy opens you to interruptions all day, every day. Plus, it discourages employees from at least trying to work out their problems

Sharpen Your Judgment

Is slur in another language still a slur?

"I may be Black, but I know some Spanish," said employee Michael Jones. "And I know my supervisor isn't calling me nice things."

"How can you be so sure?" said Eleanor Bigley, the division manager.

"For one, 'amigo' is not a word he's ever used. He's no 'friend' of mine," Michael said.

"We don't expect everyone to be friends here," Eleanor said. "We do expect everyone to be friendly and keep this a pleasant workplace."

"It's more like a hostile workplace," Michael shot back.

"He calls me 'mijo' – that's son – and I won't even repeat the other name – in any language – but let's just say it starts with an 'N,'" Michael said.

"Well, I don't know if a word spoken in another language amounts to hostility," Eleanor said, "but I will look into this."

Offenses don't stop there

"Look at the assignments he gives me, too," Michael said. "It's all the duties no one wants. I also suspect he tore up my promotion application."

"I'll work with facts, not suspicions, in my investigation," Eleanor said.

Michael quit before she finished the investigation and sued, claiming he was forced to leave because he worked in a hostile environment.

The company fought the case. Did it win?

This regular feature sharpens your thinking and helps keep both you and your firm out of trouble. It describes a real legal conflict and lets you judge the outcome.

Productive …
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or find solutions.

Instead, Thomas suggests you "be clear that everyone in your organization should be considered *accessible*, but not necessarily *constantly available*."

On-site, you might hang a sign that says, "My open office hours today are …"

In a virtual setting, you might set (and post) hours when you shut down the email app, put your phone on silence and keep it out of sight, and set your chat tools on "do not disturb."

Promote self-confidence

Confident people usually charge ahead, doing what needs to be done. They believe they're doing it right and well – and most likely are.

Encourage employees to charge ahead by getting behind them first.

Make "sure they understand the responsibilities of their role, the types of decisions they can and should make on their own, and the general limits of their authority," Thomas says. "Then, encourage them to find their own solutions to day-to-day problems. Instead of answering questions, try using the phrase, 'I trust your judgment.'"

That's not a one-time conversation, either. Regularly review – and expand – their role, decision-making authority and responsibilities.

Look for opportunities to up skills

Your encouragement and trust alone won't take some employees to the next level. But training might.

Look for training opportunities, if you:

- don't trust an employee's judgment
- recognize a skills gap, or
- see opportunity for development.

Then direct those employees toward training (in-person, online, self-guided or events) that will help build the right skills. If they aren't interested, you might need to realign their duties with their skills level.

Make mistakes safe

Fear might be the culprit behind some employees' reluctance to charge ahead. They're afraid to disappoint, fail or cause bigger issues.

Try to remove unpleasant consequences associated with failure. And when they do fail, talk about the lessons learned. Give employees small risk ventures at first so failures are small. As they realize more success, they gain confidence to do more without asking questions or for approval.

Sources: Thomas, maurathomas.com; Harvard Business Review, tinyurl.com/productive513

Tech Corner

3 tips for easier, faster web searches

Imagine the time you could save if you found what you wanted online on the first search?

OK, maybe not a ton of time, but enough that you can get back to work faster.

Be savvy with the search

So use these Google tips for finding what you need on the web:

- **Choose words carefully.** When you type in the search box, use words that would likely be on the *website* you want. For instance, type "computer technician" rather than "my computer is broke."
- **Don't sweat the small stuff.** It's OK to misspell or skip capitalization. Search engines find and use the most common spelling of the words.
- **Use shortcuts.** Google will show answers to questions in search results. A few examples: Type "weather" for your local forecast, or add a city name for another locale. Type "define" and any word for quick definition. Type in a math equation – such as "3x486" – for a fast answer. Or get unit conversions with searches such as "10 dollars in euros."

Source: tinyurl.com/search513

Communication Briefs

■ More virtual meetings: Time for guidelines

There's a new incivility at work.

It's called virtual incivility, and it goes on behind cameras in Zoom meetings, through keyboards in workplace apps and verbally on phone calls.

The bully might speak over others, make snide remarks and interrupt.

But you can stay ahead of it by creating a virtual workplace etiquette guide. A good starting point is your existing, on-site behavior guidelines and expectations.

Give employees examples of what's not acceptable, rather than blanket statements, such as, "We won't tolerate rude behavior."

Some examples:

- Raise your hand (real or virtual) before speaking
- Address colleagues respectfully
- Do not yell or use profane language
- Maintain a professional tone, and
- Listen to the speaker.

Source: tinyurl.com/civility513

■ Did pandemic change morale? How to refocus

To ensure employees' health and safety during the pandemic, many companies shifted away from traditional ways to motivate employees.

So while you may not do the same things you once did to build morale, it's important to re-engage employees with perks that fit today's workplace.

To be sure you're still on track, consider these questions:

- Do you still recognize and reward employees for their work?
- Do you maintain a culture where employees feel cared about?
- Do employees have opportunities to recognize and reward colleagues for extra efforts and support?
- Have you continued to offer employees enough opportunities to build relationships – such as social events during and outside of work?

Real Problems, Real Solutions

Our subscribers come from a broad range of organizations, large and small. In this regular networking feature, three of them share their successes in improving workplace communication.

1 How we made employee mental well-being a priority

Our employees worked hard before the pandemic. And they continued to put in the same high level of effort as the pandemic wore on, whether they worked from home, in the offices or a combination of both.

We did some things – such as parties and games – on site and virtually to boost morale and ease the stress.

But we wanted to do more and introduce a holistic approach to their well-being.

That prompted us to encourage more mental health well-being. We opened up additional resources for employees to access such as mental telehealth, yoga and meditation. And one activity stuck as a positive across the company for all employees.

A day as you please

It's our BriteBreaks – one Friday every month when the entire staff takes the day off to do something for their mental health. Some just relax. Others participate in favorite activities. But everyone steps back and takes a break.

(David Hanrahan, CHRO, Eventbrite, shared this success at the online conference "Elevate 2021: Building the Future of Mental Health in the Workplace")

2 Big morale boost: Virtual music festival

Like most companies, our employees worked from home a lot longer than we expected. In fact, most continue to work from home full- or part-time.

Many said they missed the fun, morale-boosting activities we'd do when we all worked side-by-side.

We could tell people weren't connecting socially as much as they once did.

Lots of ways to participate

That prompted us to organize several online events, but one stood out as huge success. It was our virtual music festival. We invited employees to perform their musical talents during the event. We also brought on a DJ.

Some employees did acoustic sessions from their homes. Others sang with background music. Some formed an online band. Many danced to all the music.

Plus, we raised money for a charity through donations during the event.

(Johnny Oster, Director of Internal Communications, Facebook, Menlo Park, CA)

3 Tactic to get candid, powerful feedback

As a leader, employees sometimes tell you what they think you want to hear. That's not necessarily good for creativity or growth.

Without new insight – and sometimes outright opposition – you may not improve yourself or your organization.

Intimidating at first

To get better feedback from employees and colleagues, I often say, "This is my view of the situation. Tell me yours."

I lead with my opinion to be a little intimidating. And I wait patiently for the response.

I want to hear more from people who are – or become – comfortable debating with me and giving me a different perspective.

That usually helps create constructive conversations that help us grow and improve.

(Thomas Costabile, Executive Director/CEO, American Society of Mechanical Engineers, shared this success on LinkedIn)

⚖ YOUR LEGAL COACH

■ Should we offer COVID-19 vaccines on-site?

Question: With vaccination mandates, we want to offer the vaccine on-site. Can – or should – we?

Answer: You can, but don't be hasty, say the team of employment law attorneys at Perkins Coie LLP.

Here's why: Employers who offer COVID-19 vaccines – either directly or through a third party – may be liable for losses or incidents that come up during the vaccination. For instance, the employee has an adverse reaction.

You might be able to protect yourself from liability through the Public Readiness and Emergency Preparedness Act (PREP Act), but that hasn't been determined yet.

Instead, encourage employees to get vaccinated, direct them to locations for it and give them time to get vaccinated, the attorneys recommend.

More on PREP: tinyurl.com/PREP213

Source: *tinyurl.com/3se8d95u*

LIGHTER SIDE

■ Vengeful and funny, all wrapped in one

Whether it's your real spouse or an office spouse, you likely get ticked at each other from time to time. And the best revenge is laughter. For example:

- I know it sounds mean, but when I'm mad at my wife and want to lash out, I open a bottle of some condiment when there's already one open – @the BoydP
- Instead of telling my husband I'm annoyed with him, I'll put strawberries in his salad – @LizHackett
- My husband ticked me off, so I sent him a picture of the thermostat set to 72 degrees – @not_thenanny
- The next time my linguist boyfriend ticks me off, I'm just going to say "irregardless" and see what he does – @aubviouslynot.

Source: *RD.com*

What employees hate about work now

Most employees are glad to be back at work. But it doesn't mean they love it.

In fact, there some things they hate about it.

"We're on the cusp of a new workforce culture," said Frank Connolly, director of research at MindEdge Learning. "This will come with its own challenges."

Top of their lists

Here are employees' top hates – and how to improve them.

- **Schedules.** Nearly 70% of employees worked from home at the pandemic's peak – and loved the flexibility. Now they hate rigid schedules. Be as flexible as possible now, focusing on output more than input.

- **The boss.** Three-quarters of employees say their boss is the most stressful part of their job. The best way to change that attitude: Step back. Give them more autonomy as they prove their abilities to handle more responsibility.

- **Inequities.** Almost 60% of employees think managers prefer on-site employees to remote folks. It's not unfounded: Six in 10 managers admitted they do prefer on-site employees! This can't be. Treat all employees fairly and equally at all times.

Source: HRMorning, tinyurl.com/work513

Don't be THAT boss: 'Friending' employees frowned upon

Managers be warned: Stop before you click the "Add Friend" button!

Employees don't want to be your Facebook friend. And they don't want the discomfort of you asking them to be.

Why?

A Harvard Business School study found employees don't want to risk showing "the other side" of themselves to managers they have to face in the office on Monday morning.

"Maybe you invite your boss to your house, but you're not going to invite the boss to the Vegas party, and those are the pictures he's going to see," say the authors.

3 alternatives

Even if you want to be relatable to employees, its best to skip social media friendships.

Better bets: Connect at work over coffee. Share funny, appropriate things on your internal work app. And stay connected on professional platforms such as LinkedIn.

Source: tinyurl.com/notfriends513

Sharpen Your Judgment – The Decision

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No, the company lost when the court ruled in the employee's favor.

The employee's attorney claimed he worked in a hostile work environment fueled by his supervisor's racial bias. That was proven by the boss's consistent use of slurs and demeaning name-calling, always spoken in Spanish.

To make it worse, the supervisor gave the employee less-desirable assignments and foiled his efforts to be promoted, the attorney claimed.

The company's attorney argued it wasn't a hostile work environment because the supervisor didn't consistently use derogatory terms. Furthermore, what he said in Spanish was likely misinterpreted.

The court said, no way! A slur is a slur, regardless of the language it's spoken in. Same goes for demeaning language. The supervisor created a hostile work environment.

Language doesn't matter; words do

The court said the language doesn't matter. Words do. It's never OK for a boss or an employee to demean others or use slurs in the workplace.

Work with HR to train all employees on what's not appropriate to say in the workplace.

(Based on *Johnson v. PRIDE Industries.* Dramatized for effect.)