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The Unapproachable Manager

“My office door is always open.” “Any problem you have, bring it to me.” “We are a family in this company!” “My staff know they can talk to me about anything.” These are statements that have been recited on so many occasions, by so many managers, in so many workplaces, that they border on ‘sociological cliché’. It appears that almost all managers view themselves in a pleasant, approachable, and affable light. However, in one study conducted by the Gallup Management Consulting Company, it was found that 50% of employees quit their jobs to get away from their manager. Essentially, people don’t leave bad companies, they leave bad bosses. This writer is certain that at some point in every employee’s professional journey, they would have encountered at least one unapproachable manager. These managers come in many shapes and forms, whether it be the quick-to-cast-and-assign-blame type, the my-way-or-the-highway type, the chronically-abusive-and-emotional-reactor type or the divide-and-conquer-specialist. Regardless, all unapproachable managers negatively impact the individual and the organization.

The modern work environment is fast-paced and competitive, and employees are expected and required to be innovative and critical thinking. Employees should not be spending valuable time and effort walking on eggshells or constantly preparing themselves mentally for dismissive and abusive responses. When employees feel a sense of security in expressing their thoughts, visions, and ideas, it doesn’t only enhance their job satisfaction, but also increases productivity and efficiency. An approachable manager creates an environment in which employees feel comfortable in giving of themselves, and in seeking guidance. In 2011, the Chartered Management Institute (CMI) released the results of a survey, which evaluated the contributing issues of what they referred to as a “stressed out, unfulfilled workforce.” The results indicated that approximately 61% of respondents wanted to ask their boss for assistance in making a decision but were not given the opportunity.

The employee’s freedom to approach and engage the

manager also speaks to the level of psychological safety that exists within the space. Safety, according to Maslow’s pyramid, is a basic human need. Psychological safety may be viewed as ‘the absence of interpersonal fear’. When psychological safety is present, people are able to speak up with work-relevant content and increase productivity. If a manager intends to support a high performing team, s/he needs to ensure that all relationships and cultures foster openness, safety and inclusion; allowing the team to exhibit greater willingness to collaborate and take risks, which would in turn stimulate creativity and overall success.

Both manager and staff must put forward a directed and purposeful effort to engage in open communication. This would serve to foster transparency and collaboration. Poor communication between managers and those who fall under them can negatively affect employee retention. According to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), 74% of employees consider regular open communication between them and their supervisors as the most effective way to retain them. Open communication should also be supported by the institution’s policies and also by management’s attitudes.

Managers who are trustworthy are in fact better positioned to understand and appreciate the needs and aspirations of their staff. This in turn makes leading more personalized and supportive. There are industrial relations and human resource practitioners who would argue that trust is the cornerstone of the employment relationship, when employees trust their manager, they are more likely to be loyal to the institution whilst staying committed to their responsibilities.

Finally, managers would need to work on their own development. This refers to the self-awareness aspect of emotional intelligence. Managers could start by asking themselves the following difficult and uncomfortable questions: Have you ever noticed your subordinates expressing looks of fear or intimidation in your presence?

Do they unnecessarily litter their emails with words such as ‘respectfully,’ ‘humbly,’ ‘kindly or ‘with all due respect’?’ Do conversations change when you enter a room? When you ask questions, do they look at each other, waiting for a brave champion to speak first? Do they appear to give their honest opinions, or do they simply restate your original points/ideas?... Additionally, in attempting to bridge the disconnect, managers can also try to make regular attempts to interact with subordinates on a one-on-one basis, get to know team members as individuals, and celebrate personal milestones.

The importance of creating and maintaining a safe and open relationship between manager and staff cannot be overstated. Ultimately, heavy is the head that wears the crown and managers, by virtue of them being human, are subjected to their own emotions, insecurities and to the stressors of the job. We, as young professionals who have endured the horrid experiences of unapproachable managers, should learn from their many shortcomings and endeavor to do better when we assume management positions. We belong to the generation that has challenged many stereotypes. We can do better!... If, however, we assume these positions, and still choose to uphold this archaic, unapproachable management rhetoric... may lightning indeed strike us down.

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