



Are your good intentions harming your employees?

By Julie Winkle Giulioni

With employee stress, burnout and mental health challenges at an all-time high, many leaders are working overtime (literally) and digging deep within themselves to find ways to support those who report to them. Given the extraordinary pressures these leaders face themselves, their good intentions to care for and commitment to staff members is inspiring. And yet, in some cases, their efforts are having the unintended consequence of thwarting career development — a workplace benefit that's increasingly important to workers today.

Might you — in an effort to support your own employees — be engaging in any of these leadership behaviors with good intentions, but with growth-limiting outcomes?

Heavier than usual (or necessary) supervision

In response to high levels of stress and burnout, some leaders are trying to stay close to their employees, reduce their cognitive load and help them stay on track. They're offering what they believe is support — but what can feel overbearing or smothering. Too much oversight, narrow parameters and constant check-ins define micromanagement. They rob people of the ability to think for themselves, solve their own problems, experiment, innovate and fail (which can deliver some of our most powerful lessons.) This behavior (even when well-meaning) sends a “no trust” message and results in a “no growth” culture.

Reluctance to delegate

Managers and leaders understand that many employees are stretched beyond their limits. In a kind-hearted effort to lighten the load of others, they take on more responsibilities. The result is that they become overburdened and less available to help others grow. And, in absorbing the additional workload, assignments that might represent exceptional opportunities for engagement and development are not available to the employees who might benefit from them.

Insulation from harsh realities

The world and organizations are moving fast. A tsunami of change, news, evolving risks and more flood the inboxes and psyches of leaders on a daily basis. To protect employees, many withhold information that may generate additional pressure or stress. These good intentions, however, also prevent employees from understanding the big picture. Employees need visibility to the good, the bad and the ugly to understand the landscape and levers ... and to learn. Evolving events, shifting conditions and threats suggest possible ways to future-proof one's career and create the guardrails for meaningful and sustainable development.

Sugarcoated feedback

Feedback is among the most frequently and consistently requested skills leaders ask for help with. They're fearful of the unintended consequences of not doing it well. They don't want to hurt feelings or harm relationships, and they certainly don't want to create an environment that could negatively affect retention. So, they avoid it, sandwich it between compliments, minimize it or take responsibility for the issue. But excessively gentle feedback robs people of the information they need to change, learn and develop their careers.

Application of the golden rule

With the best intentions, many leaders assume that everyone else is just like them. They figure that “if this is what I wanted, it must be what others want too.” For instance, if the leader wanted to climb the corporate ladder, they presume that their employees are similarly motivated and create plans for advancement. They apply the methods and experiences that worked for them to others. They generously practice the golden rule; they do unto others as they'd like to be done to.

Unfortunately, others aren't them. Others have their own unique motivations, goals and interests that may in no way resemble the leader's. A more genuinely helpful approach is to apply the platinum rule and to do unto others as they want to be done to. This means getting to know each employee, co-creating relevant and personalized goals and working with others to generate plans that are uniquely their own.

Today's leaders may be well served to remember the proverb, “the road to hell is paved with good intentions” as they challenge their assumptions about how to be most helpful with their employees ... so they don't inadvertently allow good intentions to pave a growth career development dead-end.

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