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Know when it's time to be tough

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If you are the owner or managing director of a business, there are three steps you should take that can significantly improve the quality (and productivity) of your work force:

The first is to clarify in writing what is expected of every **employee**.

The second is to lead by example, demonstrating in everything you **do** that you are a person of integrity and honesty, and that you are driven to exceed the goals you set for others.

The third is the most challenging of all because it involves being tough. There will be times you need to respond with toughness to certain individuals within your work force. **If** you try to kill them with kindness because you don't have the chutzpa to be strong, decisive and fair; **if** you strive to be a friend rather than the boss; or **if** you lack the decisiveness to take difficult steps when needed, your business (and your work force) will suffer.

With all the other business pressures and stresses business executives face, handling these three essential elements appropriately can be very challenging, which is why many of these executives are only moderately successful.

Clarify what is expected

Meet with every **employee** who reports to you, at least on an annual basis. The two of you should openly discuss the **employee's** strengths as well as areas for improvement. Agree on a written set of goals to be completed (or initiated) by the next review period. The success of these periodic reviews will **not** only serve as a basis for annual wage adjustments, it will also serve as a career mentoring process, helping each worker become a greater asset to the business.

Lead by example

Whatever behavior or performance you expect from your employees, you must demonstrate to an even greater degree within yourself. Constantly exhibit impeccable ethics when dealing with customers, employees, suppliers, financiers, and all other stakeholders in your business. A strong leadership image and respect of your peers and subordinates takes a long time to build up, but it can be lost in an instant through inappropriate behavior. **If** your performance is anything less than perfect in this area, the other two essential elements will **not** be as effective.

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Be tough when necessary

If you are successful with the first two elements, most of your work force will respond positively. **If** you treat your staff like professionals, without overbearing rules or restrictive policies, they should respond in a positive manner. However, there are always a few bad apples who let others **do** the lion's share of the work, or act unprofessionally, discourteously, or in a demeaning manner toward others. When this happens, you cannot decide to look the other way or bury your head in the sand, blindly hoping the offensive behavior will vanish. Some employees really **do** want a mile when you give them an inch. They will take your inaction as tacit approval of their destructive actions.

However, **do not** react by creating more restrictive directives affecting every **employee**, just to keep the slacker in line. This is a sure-fire way to bring out mediocrity in all your work force, because the majority of your good workers will perceive everyone is being punished because of one bad apple.

Call the problem worker into your office. This is **not** the time for kind and gentle behavior, but neither is it appropriate for yelling and screaming. Tell this **employee** firmly and bluntly what his/her offensive behavior is and that it is **not** acceptable in your business. Listen to the **employee's** excuses, but only in rare cases should these words temper your actions. Explain the changes you expect the **employee** to make, and spell out the consequences **if** the **employee** does **not** comply.

If the problem is causing serious disruption to your business, you may need to consider placing the offending **employee** on thirty-day probation, which will allow you to gauge **if** the problem is resolved. This action should involve a written notice, prepared in advance, which the **employee** must sign before leaving your office.

If you consider this person to be a valuable **employee** you want to retain **if** possible, at the conclusion of the meeting tell the **employee** you value him/her personally but **not** his/her actions. Conclude by emphasizing you expect all employees to work together for the good of the business and emphasize the **employee's** future with your company is now in his/her hands.

One of the most challenging aspects of business leadership is dealing with **employee** issues. The cancer of distrust, anger and frustration caused by performance problems, lack of motivation, and insubordination can disrupt your entire work force. Turning your head the other way, or telling yourself you have more important things to **do**, will result in the cancerous tumor growing and spreading throughout your business. When surgery is necessary, you must have the courage to break out the scalpel.

Learn to recognize potential problems and then deal with them promptly and fairly. Both your workers and your company's bottom line will be the better for it.

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