

Knowledge Worker

The First Commandment of Leadership

(November 2016)

There are no better examples of knowledge workers than managers and supervisors. Good managers and supervisors are essential to the success of any organization. A key ingredient in their success is their ability to lead instead of simply boss people around. In turn, their ability to lead depends in large measure on having the respect and the trust of the people over whom they exercise authority. The first thing to know about respect and trust is that these accordances are not automatically bestowed upon promotion or assignment to a managerial or supervisory position; they must be earned. A couple of anecdotes from my personal experiences will illustrate.

While with Educational Testing Service (ETS) I was assigned responsibility for the Custom Operations Division (COD). Its previous executive director (ED) had been promoted to vice president and the division needed a new ED. I was given the job.

At the time, a major line of business elsewhere in the company was in jeopardy. The line in question tied to government work; the contract was up, and it was clear the feds were going to change things. The feds granted a one-year renewal of the contract – on their terms – but the handwriting on the wall was unmistakable: in a year's time that line of business would be gone. I argued for walking away, for not agreeing to renew the contract on the terms the feds were imposing. The feds would have nowhere to go and that would bring them back to the table and ETS could negotiate a termination of the line of business that was more acceptable to ETS. My suggestion fell on deaf ears.

Knowing that the end was in sight, and with it would come staff reductions and cost-cutting measures, I began taking steps within COD to be ready for the inevitable. During the ensuing year I found ways of reducing staff without having to let anyone go; mainly, I simply approved requests for transfer to other divisions and I did not fill those positions, nor did I fill positions left vacant when an employee left the company. I also worked on ways of improving workflows and productivity to make up for the loss of staff. And I worked on garnering additional work for the division.

Sure enough, a year later, the line of business in jeopardy was gone and the management staff throughout the company was called upon to come up with cost-cutting measures and staff reductions to the tune of nine percent of the overall budget. At a staff meeting of Operations EDs, the VP called upon the division managers for their numbers. Everyone but me dutifully coughed up cost-cuts and staff reductions. When it came my turn, I shrugged and said, "I told you a year ago this was going to happen and the time to prepare for it was back then. Since then I have reduced staff in COD by 18 percent and cut costs by 15 percent. I'm not going to cough up any more at this time." No one said anything. The VP nodded, and the subject was never raised again. When I returned to my office in COD, the two managers who ran the show in COD were waiting for me, anxious to know what kind of staff cuts they were facing (and perhaps if either of their heads was on the block). One of them asked point blank, "How many people are we losing?" I smiled and said, "None. I wasn't inclined to give at the office today." They looked dumbstruck for a moment then hurried off to let their respective staffs know that

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all were safe. The people of COD looked at me differently afterward. I like to think I had earned their respect.

On another occasion, a program manager in charge of one of the programs we supported came onto the floor in COD and began badgering one of my clerical people. Ranting and raving and yelling at her, he grabbed some papers out of her hands and went back to his office. I was soon informed about this and after a brief discussion with the clerical person involved I went to the program director's office where I confronted him and demanded the papers back. He gave them to me and I informed him he was never again to enter COD spaces without first obtaining my explicit permission. I returned the papers to the clerical person and informed my two managers that the program director in question was not to enter COD without first checking in with me. If they spotted him on the floor they were to bring him to my office. That little incident made its way around the grapevine very quickly and my trust and respect quotient went up some more.

I spent 20 years in the United States Navy, retiring as a chief petty officer. In the Navy, you learn that anytime you have authority over others your first responsibility is to look out for them. *"Thou shalt look after thy people"* is the first commandment of leadership. You support them, you help them, you coach them, you recognize them, you encourage them, you thank them, you back them up, you cover for them, you make them look good; in short, you look after them. If you do, they'll look after you.

Here's a word of caution: Don't try cooking up fake situations to earn the trust and respect of your people; they will see right through that and instead of improving things you will have damaged their trust and respect for you. Instead, you deal with live situations in ways that clearly demonstrate you look after your people. I know full well there were other EDs at ETS who, in my shoes, would have shrugged and cut costs and staff and who would have shrugged again at the outrageous behavior of the program director who bullied one of my people. In my book, they were politicians, not managers or supervisors and most certainly not leaders.

And what's the value or payoff of earning the trust and respect of your people? Well, owing to the vicissitudes of business, there were other occasions that called for tough decisions and to successfully implement them I needed my people to dig in and give it their all. I am happy to say they did. You need the trust and respect of your people if you are to accomplish anything at all, especially anything of significance and most especially under trying circumstances. Most of all, you need the trust and respect of the people you lead if you are in fact to lead them.

About the Author

Fred Nickols, CPT, is a knowledge worker, a writer, consultant and former executive who spent 20 years in the United States Navy, retiring as a decorated chief petty officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the managing partner of [Distance Consulting LLC](#). His website is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Workers' Tool](#)

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[Room](#) and more than 200 free articles, book chapters, and papers. Fred is a longtime member of ISPI and writes this monthly column for *PerformanceXpress*.