

In This Issue: “Are You Guilty Of “False Kindness”?”

Test for Success
Tools, Tips, & Techniques for Avoiding
Hiring Mistakes and Developing People
From Helm and Associates, Inc.
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Are You Guilty Of “False Kindness”?

Jack Welch, who ran General Electric for years, had a blunt label for managers who thought they were doing an under-performing employee a favor by being lenient. He called their behavior, which he said is well-intentioned but counter-productive, “false kindness.”

Let’s take a look at what he meant by well-intentioned but counter-productive. Welch was talking specifically about how managers deal with subordinates whose performance is clearly below the level that the individual is capable of achieving.

In those cases, a manager may be tempted simply to “let it go” for a variety of reasons: perhaps that manager believes that it is an isolated event, unlikely to happen again, or perhaps the manager believes that personal pressure in the subordinate’s life is affecting performance.

Welch’s point is that the manager’s intentions may be good: the manager may be trying to avoid nit-picking or the “piling on” syndrome where he becomes part of overwhelming pressure in the subordinate’s life. But Welch goes on to say that well-intentioned leniency is ultimately counter-productive.

In order to understand why such leniency is ultimately counter-productive, let’s be very clear about the distinction between leniency and legitimate (necessary) feedback.

Leniency is what happens when the manager overlooks mistakes, poor performance, or poor judgment – lets it go by without comment of any kind. And it's a "false kindness" because it isn't a kindness at all. The subordinate needs information about what he or she has done incorrectly or poorly in order to avoid doing it again in the future.

Let's be very clear that we aren't saying that managers should expect subordinates not to make mistakes. We all make mistakes, and we all perform better on some days than on others. But managers need to provide subordinates with clear standards about what is acceptable, and what is not, and then guide subordinates' performance by showing them when, where, and how to keep their performance at the required level.

What's the worst that can happen if a manager practices "false kindness?" Well, the first thing that happens is that performance standards are lowered, whether the manager intends to do so or not. Second, not only does the subordinate in question get this message, but other employees get it as well. It can become like a virus spreading through the workplace: what becomes "acceptable" for one employee can easily become the standard for all. Finally, the manager diminishes his overall ability to be a leader; the gap between what he says is required and what he actually does require becomes too large.

How can you avoid these unintended consequences and still remain flexible in response to variations in performance? After, all subordinates do have personal crises that affect performance from time to time, and a good manager responds to those variations flexibly. There are several things that the manager should do:

1. Hold employees accountable for their performance and their attitudes. Don't let things slide, hoping that the subordinate will improve without your having to confront him. Remember that what you need to do is provide objective, performance-based feedback, not nit-picking criticism.
2. Create standard consequences for unacceptable performance and communicate them clearly and often. This means that you'll need to think through what your expectations are for each position, so that you will know when performance is unacceptable. Do it, and make sure that the standards are specific, behavioral, and measurable.
3. Enforce the standards. If you give an employee three chances to improve performance and you've provided them with necessary tools and resources, plenty of feedback and encouragement, and you are not seeing results that you both agreed upon, then it's time for the employee to move on.

You can't encourage improved performance from your subordinates if you treat one or more individuals as special cases who are exempt from the standards to which you hold everyone else. In this area, as in so many others, therefore, thinking through your expectations, communicating them clearly, and then holding people accountable for their actions is the way to avoid false kindness.

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