

In This Issue: “Avoiding Reverse Favoritism”

Test for Success
Tools, Tips, & Techniques for Avoiding
Hiring Mistakes and Developing People
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Favoritism, as we all learned back in high school, was when the teacher allowed her preference for a student to result in favored treatment, such as higher grades. It often happens out here in the real world also. As troublesome as favoritism is, reverse favoritism can be just as bad.

Reverse favoritism, as you have probably guessed, is the opposite of favoritism. Rather than singling an employee out for favored treatment, it occurs when a boss allows her aversion or dislike for a subordinate to affect the way she treats the person.

Where does reverse favoritism come from? Sometimes it happens because a person has a characteristic or attitude that we don't like, especially if it is one we see in ourselves: the messy person who can't stand other people's messes, or the sarcastic person who is particularly sensitive to sarcasm directed at him.

Or it may be due to an adverse reaction to watching a subordinate struggle unsuccessfully in his job, his struggle resulting in missed deadlines and poor quality work that drags down the work group. In that case, we may watch the struggle and feel frustrated that the employee can't seem to get a handle on his difficulty; that frustration can sometimes lead to a feeling of dislike.

Sometimes the reason is not as clear. There are some people, for each of us, with whom we just don't "click." That lack of rapport can turn into aversion, particularly if we don't watch out for it. It's just human nature, but it's worth pointing out that, as in so many other areas, one's man's sauce is another man's gravy – that is, the people with whom I may find it hard to make a personal connection are the very people with whom others feel compatible!

Wherever it comes from, reverse favoritism causes problems and can be costly in many ways for the company. Even when the manager who displays a reverse favoritism is completely unaware of it (and we often are!), the impact is not limited to the person who is its focus. Reverse favoritism affects everyone on your team.

Appearing to “have it in” for a subordinate can cause the manager to lose credibility, destroy teamwork, and create and emphasize an air of unpredictability around the manager. For example, allowing your dislike for a subordinate to influence the decisions you make about that person is usually obvious to the other team members and, depending on the size of the organization, to others outside of your work group. It disrupts teamwork and diminishes your credibility.

Reverse favoritism unsettles everyone exactly because it is unpredictable. If one person can become the target of it, who might be next? These problems can lead to turnover, possible EEO complaints, and even legal problems. All employees deserve to be treated equally, especially the ones we don’t like.

It is important to point out here that “dislike” is not the same thing as legitimate concern over a subordinate’s performance problem. One of the manager’s most important jobs is to give even-handed, accurate, and timely feedback to subordinates about performance, along with specific recommendations for improvement. We can’t learn from mistakes if we don’t know we made them, or if we don’t know what is expected of us. The manager’s job is to be sure that he is not allowing personal antipathy to color how or when he gives that feedback.

To avoid reverse favoritism:

1. Know your own pet peeves! We tend to dislike most in others the things we dislike in ourselves. There’s a clever psychological ploy that we are all pretty expert at using: in order NOT to see ourselves as the sort of mean-spirited person who would treat another person unfairly just because we don’t happen to like that person, we turn our “complaints” about that person into his or her character defect. In that way, we feel “justified” in our attitude. And the unpleasant little kernel of truth about this ploy is that it usually is based on something in the other person that is uncomfortably close to something we don’t like in ourselves.
2. Seek objective feedback from other people in the company regarding the problem, or problems, you see in the person. Remember, it’s easy to put on “emotional blinders” and lose your own objectivity. Make sure you have a backup. If you can’t find someone inside the company, find an objective person outside the company (probably not your spouse!) You need someone who won’t play “ain’t it awful” with you; you need someone who can avoid automatically taking your side and telling you how right you are. Objectivity is the key.
3. Beware of the natural tendency to look for justification for your feelings about “Joe.” There may be poor performance issues as well, but poor performance is a management

problem. If Joe is not performing well he needs feedback on the issue or issues, suggestions for how to correct his poor behavior and regular feedback on his progress. He does NOT need for you to use those issues as justification for not liking him.

Reverse favoritism can be just as destructive and costly for your team as favoritism. It turns out that the cure – or, even better, the prevention – is to exercise vigilance: know yourself, make sure you have objective back-ups who will tell you when you are out of line, and focus on performance. Save your sense of playing favorites for game day!

Remember, People ARE your most important asset!

To Hire the Best, Test!

To Reveal Management Potential, Test!

To Diagnose Problem Behavior, Test!

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