
Have workers unknowingly fired the boss?

By James F. Bracher

Even if you have been a solid manager in Silicon Valley for 10 to 15 years or helped launch a couple of start-up companies, you may have been "fired" by your employees.

Because good people are a crucial component of success, you hire the best you can find in the right disciplines. You try to get them stock options to reward their hard work. Then you push ahead. Maybe you are successful, maybe not. But at least you gave it your best shot, right?

Unless you really took the trouble to get to know your people and relate to them, something that a surprisingly large percentage of managers do not do, you blew an extraordinary opportunity. If the workplace chemistry is not right, the company is almost never running on all its cylinders.

There is a new workforce out there, and you have to learn how it ticks. The Puritan work ethic is diminishing, and most employees do not trust their bosses as much as they once did. Today, employees are willing to show their independence.

The business pages endlessly report corporate restructurings and the elimination of "superfluous" employees. Popular books now tell people they are naive to think they will spend most of their careers with one or two companies. The message for the 1990s is clear: Workers must develop a flexible package of skills. In other words, they should aim for "employability security," rather than employment security. With or without stock options, fewer people will give 100 percent to a company they suspect may not really care about them, and some may not commit themselves fully even if the company does care.

Despite all the hoopla about California's sky-high housing prices, the staggering increase of two-worker households has actually reduced the economic pressure of working extra hard. More people are getting tired of the rat race. Managers may not realize it, but subordinates make value judgments about their supervisors and act accordingly most of the time. Disaffected employees develop a form of passive resistance. The boss realizes he/she is not getting as much done as he/she should, but is not sure why, even though workplace morale almost always is low.

But the boss can get rehired. First, he or she must learn to listen and then follow a few steps:

- Lead your staff effectively by praising good performance and sharing credit for success.
- Communicate more effectively by listening to what employees say to you and about you.
- Develop your people better by setting aside adequate time to train them and monitor their progress.
- Supervise by setting realistic goals for workers and show no favoritism.
- Take pains to understand the new-generation workforce.

The old-fashioned "company man" is rapidly dying. Today's supervisor must realize that values have changed. Accept these changes and look for the best way to work within the new constraints. Do not slight valuable employees who refuse to work long hours. Make jobs as self-fulfilling as possible.

Another idea is to vary workers' duties. Do not keep a good, flexible employee in the same job for too long. He or she will feel stagnant. If a promotion does not make sense, a lateral transfer or an assignment to a non-routine project may be enough to keep the person happy.

Think twice about introducing "crash" workplace improvement programs that may lack long-range commitment. If workers think management will kill the program as soon as something goes awry, it is probably doomed from the start.

Sincere programs, in contrast, are valuable. A good working environment, such as one that might include flex time or job sharing and referral services for child care, should keep good employees around longer.

The workplace will be more productive if the "chemistry" is right. Different people have different personalities, but this should never stand in the way.

Once you get to know someone well, that person's behavior becomes fairly predictable. If a manager recognizes his or her own style and the personalities of those with whom he or she works, communication becomes smoother and the ability to motivate easier. Everything you do and say emits signals to your associates. If those signals are contradictory or confusing, you will not receive the feedback that tells

you they are on your wavelength. Honestly assess your own personality and take the time and effort to ask your colleagues and subordinates to tell you what they think your style is. If there is a mismatch, communicate and straighten it out.

Put the people you work with through the same exercise. Urge them to visualize confrontations with each other and find a way to avoid them or resolve them satisfactorily. Identifying different personality styles encourages healthy give and take. Emphasize there is no "bad" personality style. Underscore that different personalities should be viewed as sources of strength, not weakness.

In today's highly specialized and intricate business environment, the companies that thrive will excel at accommodating a wide assortment of different people.

There is really only one way to run a company properly, and that is by example. If employees cannot empathize with you, they will not do well by you.

Even the most mature employees want their boss to be a role model of sorts. If he or she is not, the rank-and-file are likely to be unduly influenced by the behavior of other employees or their own emotional whims.

As a veteran manager, you may not buy all of these ideas, but think about them anyway. Too many business people think the Japanese endanger America's prosperity, but an equally big threat may be the lack of flexibility to deal with the new-generation workforce.

San Jose Mercury News, Viewpoints
Monday, September 4, 1989