

## Your Career Advisor

# And a Manager Shall Lead Them: How Guidance Can Motivate Employees

By Paul Cherry

It's Saturday, and my daughter and I plan to spend our quality time at the amusement park. But first, we agree to tidy up our bedrooms. It's almost time to leave, and my room is spotless. When I peek into my daughter's room, her toys and clothes are still on the floor while she dances to a CD in blissful oblivion.

Now I have two choices: hover over my daughter, pressuring her to finish tidying, or do it myself so the job is finished fast and to my liking — the path of least resistance. That's tempting because, let's face it, I don't want to spoil our day or get it off to a rocky start, especially since my daughter and I looked forward to this all week. On the one hand, I'm angry because she didn't listen; on the other hand, she's dancing around because she can't wait for us to have our fun. What kind of person would punish a kid just because she is happy to spend quality time with her dad?

Some managers carry that feeling into the office. With the best intentions, they take the path of least resistance, brimming with more rationalizations than my daughter has Barbie dolls:

- "I'll do a better job than my employees, and I'll do it my way."
- "When upper management sees the job is done, and done right, I'll be more valuable to the company!"
- "I'm tired/afraid of nagging my employees. I want them to like me."
- "With all the work I have to do, I don't have the energy for confrontation."
- "I'm delegating duties — but deep down, I guiltily feel I'm just dumping things on my staff that I don't want to do."

### Sitting on Their "Buts"

As with my situation with my daughter, managers sometimes feel like they should do things themselves. They're afraid if

they lean on employees too hard, workers could resist or find a new job. This gives managers more to stress out about because then they'll have to step in and do that job, too, and now *their* bosses will hover over them.

With technological advances requiring fewer people to do the same amount of work, some employees may opt to sit on their "buts": "Hey, my boss and I both work hard, *but* I can only give it so much. I'm already doing the work of three people, and my boss just dumped more work on me to do before I leave today! Should I risk confrontation by telling him it's impossible to get all that done today, or is it safer to sit on my *but*? I'll do my best, *but* I'll get to it when I have time." With managers not wanting to push too hard, and employees having enough on their plates, both parties end up choosing the path of least resistance.

Providing guidance is a more positive, productive way to veer off the path of least resistance and inspire initiative among your staffers, but where do you begin? Ask yourself:

- What do I like doing most? What do I think my people like doing most, versus what they should be doing?
- How do we make it a win-win situation so team members get more of what they want?
- How do I delegate duties without seeming like I'm dumping unwanted responsibilities on people? How do I help them see it as a benefit, as an opportunity to learn and grow, not just another chore?
- Examining my employees' strengths, what are they doing right? How can I emphasize my staff's success and hold back my impulse to point out mistakes?
- Do my employees need coaching? In what ways do I need to build their confidence to encourage them to take more risks?

- How do I help them recognize where they need coaching so they're willing to take more initiative?

Give your employees boundaries as well as communication. It's not enough to tell someone on their first day on the job that they should produce \$300,000 worth of sales each quarter. Reinforce that standard with clear guidelines and examples, such as, "I want you to make five sales calls a day, with the expectation that you'll generate 20 quotes on a monthly basis. Of those 20 quotes, approximately five of those will lead to sales, with the expectation that each sale is worth on average \$15,000. I expect you to communicate with me on a weekly basis, so you can let me know what's working, what's not, how you're progressing, and where I can be a resource. Okay, let's go over your assigned accounts and how to profile prospective opportunities..."

Even the most go-getting self-starter on your team wants guidance from you, the manager. Your team members want to be clear about their responsibilities and their goals; they need to know how they're expected to contribute. They want to know what they can do, not just what they *can't* do. Provide measurable standards and expectations for each employee's particular position, and they'll not only understand the desired outcome, but also what to do on a consistent basis in order to get there. Confidence and security flourish as employees get the right guidance.

Use the following questions to determine how much guidance your employees need and how much they already understand about what's expected of them. Of course, as a manager, it's crucial that you already know the answers you need to hear. Still, some answers may surprise you. Asking these questions boldly can come

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across as intimidating, especially to a veteran employee (“Yikes! Is my job on the line here?”), so try to set the stage and ease into them with a buffer such as, “Let’s sit down for a cup of coffee. I’d like to explore with you what’s working, so I can help ensure your success over the long haul. Do you mind if I ask you some questions?”

- What are the three most important goals of your job?
- Describe for me what’s expected of you here at X Company.
- What does it mean to ‘go the extra mile’ in your position? Can you give me an example?
- What are the four major functions of your position? How should they be accomplished?
- What do you think separates a good employee from a great employee here at X Company?
- How do you know if you’re doing a good job?
- If you had to explain your job to someone visiting from our corporate office, what would you say?
- Can you outline for me how you spend your week? How much time do you spend on each of the following: making new contacts, maintaining existing relationships and completing paperwork?
- What has surprised you most about this position?

### Communication is Key

When employers provide goals and direction for their employees, everybody’s on the same page. Employees feel confident that they’re spending time on projects important to the company, and managers know their employees are on the right track. Without guidance, employees feel like they’re treading water with “busy work” while struggling to read their

bosses’ minds. This lack of guidance can rattle employees. I know, because it happened to me.

A decade ago, I was excited to start a new job working for a man I’ll call “George.” Back then, I was working for another company and feeling successful. George wooed me with promises of independence and opportunity, interviewing me several times. It took three months before the hiring process was complete. I was confident that someone who put so much thought into the hiring process would be a great boss. I was wrong.

On my first day, George and I exchanged pleasantries for five minutes. Then, just like that, he was out the door on a two-week business trip, saying, “The only way to learn this job is to do it.” That was the extent of my training! I was given no guidelines, no boundaries. I felt like a teenager whose parents had left for vacation, saying, “We’ll be away for two weeks, dear. You’re in charge while we’re gone. Be good now!” But unlike a teen home alone, I didn’t feel that sense of freedom and excitement; I felt more like I had been stranded in the woods without my *Boy Scout Handbook*. How was I to interpret “Be good?” With no clear direction from George, I was lost.

With a mortgage to pay and a family to feed, I wanted this job to work out, so I tried my best. During George’s absence, I was left with only one co-worker and no supervisor to turn to for advice. When George returned, things weren’t much better. We would pass each other in the hallways, but he never scheduled time to sit down with me and find out how things were going, or to ask what type of guidance I needed. Everyday, I felt more insecure. I was sure George would eventually call me into his office and ream me out, telling me I was completely on the wrong track.

The uncertainty was killing me. To my relief, my previous boss was eager to have me back. I met with George, certain

he would welcome my resignation, because I knew in my gut this job wasn’t working out the way I had planned.

To my astonishment, when I broke the news, George had tears in his eyes! He told me he understood and he was sorry to see me go, but he never asked me why I was leaving or how he could convince me to stay. At the time, I was so anxious to escape, I didn’t volunteer my reasons.

Admittedly, both George and I made mistakes. From the first interview, I should have asked more questions to uncover the goals and objectives of my position. George should also have asked more questions of me, especially when I resigned, so he could learn from his mistakes. I would have eagerly told him that I needed guidance and direction he hadn’t provided. Now I realize George was a good man, just not a good manager. Because he’d never managed people before, he didn’t know how. He simply practiced avoidance, putting it upon me to figure things out. I greeted George’s hands-off approach with insecurity and uncertainty. In the end, it hurt us both.

Sit down with your employee and review the standards, goals and objectives of her job. If your expectations are unrealistic, or if the employee’s standards are too low, it’s nobody’s fault; it just means you two must negotiate or clarify this position’s standards. In the long run, this positive guidance helps both of you: she’ll be a better employee with a more successful career, and you won’t have to find her replacement! ■

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### Learnings from Landings

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put everything in perspective — my job, my family and my spiritual life,” says Miller. “I learned anew that most people

will reach out to help you. And even when unemployed, I can add value. I helped two unemployed friends get jobs and I just referred an unemployed former boss to a recruiter.

“I think the key is approaching a job

search like a marketing campaign, and realizing that you can add value not only to a prospective employer, but to those who are looking for work or those who are tasked with finding great talent,” says Miller. ■