

A Manager's Job Is Making Sure Employees Have a Life Outside Work

by Arjun Dev Arora and Raman Frey

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A young man with cancer at our Silicon Valley firm requested additional sick time for post-cancer treatments and checkups.

Another employee, one who had been born in Vietnam and came to this country with his parents, requested one day per month when he would work remotely. He would return to south central Los Angeles to work a double shift at his parents' liquor store. Setting up his laptop there meant that his

parents could take a brief break from their sixteen-hour days.

Perhaps these seem like reasonable requests that any humane manager would approve. And in both cases, as their supervisors, we did grant these requests.

And yet more often than not, the unspoken rules of “killing it” here in Silicon Valley might prevent people like these from even mentioning their needs to their managers. If you’re not sleeping under your desk, you’re not committed – an attitude we sometimes refer to as “martyr capitalism.”

It’s not just that we want our employees and collaborators to get their jobs done – that’s a given – we want to see them thrive both in and out of the workplace. It’s a magnanimous attitude with no self-evident ROI, and brings to mind Gary Vaynerchuk’s quip with a venture capital professional who was quizzing him on the worthiness of his new business. She kept repeating, “But what is the ROI on this spend?” and he finally snapped and retorted, “What’s the ROI on your mother?!” In other words, not all the value of a company can be quantified.

Instead of being penalized for needing time to process a difficult life change or illness – or even to attend a child’s soccer game – we believe managers should encourage taking the time to have a rich life outside of the cube.

We have both found that encouraging employees to be creative and independent – not obedient soldiers taking orders down the chain of command – makes everyone feel like they have a stake in a positive outcome. Recent research backs this up.

An HBR.org piece from earlier this year references a University of Michigan research study, which found that employees thrive when working in an atmosphere that is “positive and virtuous,” including being treated with respect and compassion, as well as being appreciated for the value for their contributions. Kindness can reinforce competence and lead to greater success. People who are treated kindly and with respect literally operate more from their pre-frontal cortex, associated with nuanced decision making, creativity and abstract thinking, rather than their amygdala, associated with the fight or flight response.

A mean boss may get short-term results, but sows the seeds for long-term systemic failure, as has been shown by Stanford's Emma Seppala and Georgetown School of Business's Christine Porath in her research.

We are convinced that a team characterized by trust, respect and admiration, working 40-hour work weeks, will outperform a similarly competent team characterized by fear, mistrust and scarcity thinking, frantically "being productive" 80 hours per week. The statistical evidence overwhelmingly supports that more than 50 hours per week leads to diminished returns.

Fear is not the same as respect, and kindness is not the inverse of competence. People who believe their work truly benefits others and who are treated with respect in the workplace simply produce better results.

For managers who would like to move away from a pressure- and fear-based system to a more human way of leading, we suggest the following:

- Get clear on your "why." Not the *what* or the *how* of delivering your product or service, but the deep intrinsic need that's being met, your own motives and the feelings you create for customers.
- Understand what really matters to someone, whether an entry-level team member straight out of school or a veteran entrepreneur. Seek to understand what they really care about. This may sound obvious, but in the midst of pressure for deliverables, it's often forgotten.
- Give to givers. Take time to give to folks who give, be cautious of people who always take.
- Give to takers as well. But in moderation and only if it's immediate and urgent.
- Join communities of people who share your values about work, and meet with them frequently. Help one another as much as you can. The benefits may not be instant or self-evident, but there is cumulative power in ensuring that everyone thrives.

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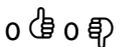
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Srividya Sabapaty 2 months ago

Very well written and couldn't agree more. The human element to a manager-subordinate relationship is what drives performance. If rules and whip is all that is required to manage, a robot would be suitable. Emotional quotient which is increasingly becoming a important management tool helps build the positive engagement with the team that leads to better performance. Developing hobbies and encouraging the team to build a life outside work certainly contributes in good measure to the productivity of the team.

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