

Tough Questions Make Managers Great

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In the early 1990's as a manager for a small company we recruited employees by running ads in local newspapers and interviewing women who were reentering the job market after a hiatus of caring for their children. Those we hired were grateful to work for us because it gave them a new sense of purpose and status. We also hired younger men who were entering the job market. As a small company our cash flow was tight and we could only pay slightly more than minimum wage. At first our employees accepted their pay but after six months many of them asked me why they were paid so little. I promised to increase their pay as we made the company more successful. Their question was tough and my promise to deliver on it was even more difficult. It is one of the toughest questions managers need to answer and the answer has to be realistic.

In the 1970's my wife and I visited my in-laws in Florida. One day my father-in-law (Dad to me) drove us to a water park and as we arrived the parking attendant told us the lot was filled. It was clear that many spaces were available and Dad looked the attendant in the eye and asked, "Are you from Lyndhurst? I think I know your sister." Unbelievably the attendant was from Lyndhurst, had a sister and quite possibly Dad knew her. He allowed us to park in an unoccupied space. As we were parking I asked Dad how he knew the attendant. "I never saw him or his sister but figured if he's working down here he might be from New Jersey and I had nothing to lose by asking him". This was one of those experiences that taught me how to turn a tough situation into a win; if you have nothing to lose, go for it.

During Ronald Reagan's second run for the Presidency he was asked a tough question during the debate with Walter Mondale regarding his age. The President stopped, took a deep breath and said, "I want you to know that I will not make age an issue in this campaign. I am not going to exploit for political purposes my opponent's youth and inexperience". His response made the headlines in the media the next day and it diffused a potentially show stopping event. His humorous response to the tough question ended the debate about his age and demonstrated his ability to reverse the situation, take the offense and control the circumstance. Had he taken a defensive

position to explain how he could lead the country despite his age, he probably would have lost the election.

These two examples of turning tough situations into winning engagements are precisely what managers need to do to be successful. Reflecting on how I responded to my employees request for more money, I could have said “I will not exploit you by giving you more money and making you rich”, or “You can have more but why do you want to pay more taxes”? These responses would have been humorous, reversed the question and made them think about their situation. But, they would have been disingenuous and counterproductive. Instead I provided a long term answer and followed up by creating new departments for them to advance within the company and earn more as they learned more. My response to their tough question was to engage them in the success of the business.

I’ve found that successful businesses are built on the shoulders of loyal employees. I’ve also found that these businesses need managers who truthfully answer employees’ tough questions and keep their promises to them. For those of you reading this newsletter who either are, or have been, managers I’m interested in hearing your personal stories on how you answered your employees’ request for more money and their other tough questions. I would like to publish them in future newsletters.