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# Do's and Don'ts for Building a Can-Do Work Force

*It's up to managers to unleash employee initiative, author says.*

What makes a good manager? My favorite answers include “getting things done through others,” “being paid to make the difficult decisions” and “protecting people from the rest of the organization.”

But a better definition might be found in what a manager doesn't do. For example, a good manager doesn't solve employees' problems for them, he doesn't ask his employees to do things he wouldn't do himself, and he doesn't take credit for their ideas or work. That's why one of the best gauges of whether someone is a good manager is to observe what happens when the manager isn't around—in other words, when the manager isn't doing anything.

After all, it's easy to manage when you're right there working with employees. You can directly state your expectations and what you'd like to be done; your employees can ask questions and do what's asked of them. Chances are, if you're looking over their shoulder, they'll take extra pains to act with a sense of urgency and to see that the job is done right.

But what about when you're not there? Do employees stay focused and energized to do the best work possible? Does the work still get done in a timely, efficient manner? Are employees creative in overcoming problems and challenges as they arise? Are customers treated as if the business depends upon them? Such behaviors don't occur by chance - they're a direct reflection of the way employees are managed.

“Management isn't about doing all the work yourself or telling people everything they should do; it's about getting your team to make decisions for themselves and consider new angles,” said Amanda Lathroum, manager of Netscape Communications' Software Services.

To encourage employees to exercise initiative in their jobs and to take risks without fear of retribution, Richard Zimmerman, chairman and CEO of Hershey Foods of Hershey, Pa., created a special award: the Exalted Order of the Extended Neck. “We wanted to reward people who were willing to buck the system, practice a little entrepreneurship, who were willing to stand the heat for an idea they really believe in,” Zimmerman said. The award has been given out many times, once to a maintenance worker who devised a way to perform midweek cleaning on a piece of machinery without losing running time.

## No Penalty for Failure

At 3M in St. Paul, Minn., employees are encouraged to develop and implement new products. Professional staff members build their own businesses within the company. Success brings promotions and raises. There's no penalty for failure in this area. Employees are motivated by the opportunity to see their ideas come to fruition. A large part of the company's sales come from products introduced through this program.

Or take Kris Carmichael, an order clerk at 800-CEO-READ in Milwaukee, Wis. Carmichael received an order one day for a particular book from a large pharmaceutical company located several states away. She immediately noticed that the book was out of print and took it upon herself to call the author in Holland, buy a copy of the book and ship it directly to the client. No one asked Carmichael to take the initiative for this client, it was just part of how she approached her work.

At the time, Carmichael didn't know was that this particular client was conducting a market test and had given the identical order to four other companies. The book Carmichael ordered arrived on the client's desk before the other organizations had even reported that it was out of print. The pharmaceutical company was so impressed with Carmichael's initiative that it now does all its corporate orders through 800-CEO-READ.

## Taking Charge

How do you get an employee like Carmichael to take initiative? Remember: It's often what you don't do. If you want employees to take responsibility, you have to treat them responsibly. If you want employees to act like they're in charge, you have to let them be in charge - even when you're around.

Although delighted with her behavior, Jack Covert, president of 800-CEO-READ, wasn't surprised with Carmichael's initiative. "Our employees are able to use their best judgment to act on their best intentions because they're encouraged and supported in doing so," Covert said. "They know that even if they make a mistake, no matter what, they always have the support of their manager. This is simply what our company is based on."

As Bill Gates, chairman and CEO of Microsoft Corp., once said: "You can tell a lot about the long-term viability of any organization by how it handles mistakes."

If you criticize or ridicule employees when they do something wrong, they probably won't repeat those mistakes. But in the process, you stifle the employee's willingness to take risks and initiative to try something new and untested; you bypass the employee's opportunity to learn from the attempt and improve performance. Instead, you diminish the employee's pride and self-esteem, and that takes a toll on the whole organization.

The secret to getting employees to take initiative when you're not around is to let them take initiative when you are around. The best managers manage the least. They let employees find the best way to get their work done and support them in the process. It's always the employees' decision whether they're going to do the best possible work. You can't force their decision to be their best, but you can encourage it, support them, and thank them when they get the results you want.

*Source: Nelson, B. (Reviewed 2018). Do's and don'ts for building a can-do work force. Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.*

# Ask Your EAP!

The following are answers to common questions supervisors have regarding employee issues and making EAP referrals. As always, if you have specific questions about referring an employee or managing a workgroup issue, feel free to make a confidential call to the EAP for a management consultation.

*Q. How can a supervisor become less fearful of confronting an employee whose performance is unsatisfactory? I think many of us live in denial, or rationalize avoidance of this unpleasant task. We want to be leaders, but this responsibility is the most distasteful. How can the EAP help?*

A. Most supervisors temporarily get away with ignoring employees who are not performing satisfactorily. Unfortunately, however, such problems grow worse, as do the risks they present. Helping supervisors understand the chronic nature of unresolved personnel issues can create an urgency to act sooner, before a crisis makes confrontation unavoidable. Shy supervisors usually are unaware of the secondary problems associated with poor performance. Failure by employees to follow work rules and disregard for one's professional development are examples. Supervisors' reluctance to confront employees is often based on fear. This might be fear of being lashed out at by the employee, disliked, or labeled unfair. The reticent supervisor's goal is to avoid an undeserved reputation as an oppressor. If this sounds familiar, contact the EAP for counseling and support, and practice some tough role plays with the EA professional. You will be astonished at how such exercises can enhance one's fortitude to act.

*Q. I have an employee who behaves as if he "knows" everything. Other employees suppress their opinions around him, so I miss their input on issues that need to be resolved. The tricky part is that he really is smart, but how do I address a problem like this?*

A. It is difficult for some supervisors to imagine that a very smart employee with significant skills and major contributions could also be a problem employee. This is an example of the "halo effect." This can make it a challenge to confront an employee about conduct issues. Obviously, it takes more than intelligence to be effective in the workplace. It also takes teamwork, soft skills, and emotional intelligence — the ability to recognize others' needs and feelings and use this information effectively. These skills appear lacking or unapplied in this instance. You can quantify the effect that your employee's behavior, conduct, and attitude have on others. You also can observe behaviors that lead to these effects. This is all you need in order to compose the effective documentation necessary to discuss and counsel your employee. Meet with the EAP, however, for consultative help on pulling these pieces together in a way that will be effective when you sit down to discuss the issues and make changes.

*Q. What's the most important thing a manager can do to help prevent workplace violence?*

A. Instructing supervisors in spotting signs and symptoms of potential violence, promoting fair work practices, and resolving conflicts are strong "to dos" in helping managers prevent workplace violence. However, the most effective overarching piece of advice is "get to know your employees." This requires possessing or developing a natural sense of curiosity, aided by a strong belief that employees are your most valuable resource. Whether you discover employees being bullied, feeling treated unfairly, facing domestic conflict, not bonding with coworkers, suffering from depression, or even showing signs of being under the influence, a supervisor has numerous opportunities to discover smaller issues that can lead to tragedy down the road. And, of course, the EAP is always there as a resource you can encourage employees to use.

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