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Balancing act

How managers can keep their distance while staying close to their employees

By **DANIEL SCHROEDER**, for *Small Business Times*

Question: I'm getting a lot of pushback about my management style from a couple of my employees. Although we work closely, I don't want to get "too close." I invite their input, but reserve the right to make the final decision. I can tell they don't like this, but I'm their boss, and my boss holds me accountable for what they do. I don't think they fully appreciate the difficult position I am in — I get pressure from two directions. How can I help them to understand that I am on their side and trying to do what it takes for all of us to succeed?

Answer: In my last article, I talked about the important contribution that communications and interpersonal skills make to managerial success. Your question underscores this point — a foundational ability for any manager is being able to work effectively through and with others.

Your situation is a common one. On the one hand, you want to forge an open channel and establish a good working relationship with your direct reports. You want to have the value of their experience and insight. You want to develop a positive climate. Yet, you recognize that sometimes the tough calls have to be made. You know that being an effective manager isn't simply about being popular — it's about achieving results. Now, I'll grant you that it would be nice to be both popular and a producer, but that's not always possible.

For starters, then, you need to come to grips with the fact that not every decision you make is going to yield neat and tidy results. You may not always have the luxury of pleasing all parties. Sometimes the decision you make will bring closure to the immediate situation. At other times, one decision will open up or expose other issues that will need to be decided. Over time, then, the ability to tolerate ambiguity becomes increasingly important.

Confronted with those kinds of difficult scenarios where the "right" alternative appears elusive, you are forced to engage in what some have called paradoxical thinking. Paradoxical thinking helps managers deal with competing priorities. As you are well aware, managers are constantly making trade-offs. Sometimes, there are no right answers. And the higher you move in the chain of command, the more severe the tensions become.

Managers are frequently asked to confront contradictory pressures (e.g., connecting with people vs. generating results). Much of the time the choice is not between good and bad, but between good and good or bad and bad. In such cases, there is a need for paradoxical thinking — thinking that transcends the contradictions and offers the perspective that two seemingly opposite conditions can simultaneously be true.

In order to engage in paradoxical thinking, you must be willing and able to engage in contradiction. You must be willing and able to integrate seemingly opposite ideas or behaviors. You must be willing and able to step outside your current level of thinking and attempt to see things from a new perspective.

For you, the contradiction appears to have the issue of control at its core. Your employees want more autonomy. You want to hold on tight. Using paradoxical thinking, you will be able to see that each of you is right. After all, it is desirable to have employees who are self-sufficient and autonomous. Yet, as a manager it is also desirable to exercise control and legitimate authority.

So, what needs to happen is for you and your employees to be work through this situation before their morale and/or productivity take a nosedive.

Put simply, you need to establish a "common ground" around work expectations. Here is a simple technique that I often use to help clarify the amount of independence that employees may exercise in making decisions that attach to their work. Ideally, to promote maximum "buy in," the following three steps should be constructed and implemented in participative (i.e., manager and employees) fashion.

First, identify the decisions that attach to the job. Second, identify the levels of operating authority that attach to each decision using this "freedom scale":

- Level 5 - Act on your own.
- Level 4 - Act, but advise me.
- Level 3 - Recommend a course of action that is negotiated with me.
- Level 2 - Ask me what to do.
- Level 1 - Wait until being told what to do.

The third step is to put this “road map” into practice, monitor the results, and evaluate its effectiveness.

My experience tells me that the kind of clarity that emerges from this process can be quite powerful. Every one is reading from the same page and ambiguity is decreased. Employees understand the latitude with which they can operate. Managers sponsor the process and control its execution.

Over time, the freedom scale can be revisited and changed. In that sense, it becomes a dynamic process, not one that is rigid and

unbending.

For that to happen, though, you will have to engage in more paradoxical thinking.

But, you already knew that.



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