

Setting the Tone

Some Guidelines for Creating a Positive Work Environment



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Randal Arnett, Claudia Burchett and Kendall L. Stewart M.D.

Introduction

Leaders set the tone. If the work environment is unpleasant, leaders are to blame. If workers hesitate, fearful that innocent mistakes will trigger public humiliation or punishment, it is because their managers focus on finding flaws. If employees fill their days with pointless tasks instead of questioning openly whether assignments actually make sense, it is because their supervisors are petty tyrants, in over their heads. If associates are plodding listlessly along, it is because they have concluded that their leaders are just putting in time too.

When workplaces are pleasant, leaders deserve some of the credit. If workers are positive, supportive, committed and creative, that is true because their executives are like-minded people, intent on recruiting, developing and promoting the next generation of capable leaders. The best leaders realize that creating and maintaining a positive work environment is their most important task. They know how to do it, and they proceed to do it day after day, no matter what happens or how they feel.

Effective leaders make this look easy. That is because leadership comes naturally to them. They gladly shoulder burdens others avoid. Real leaders take responsibility when others are looking for someone else to blame. While others preoccupy themselves with the problems, leaders look for solutions. Above all else, capable leaders intend to make a difference, and they realize that they can only make a difference through meaningful relationships with others.

They understand that real relationships are not built and sustained by occasional social chit chat over drinks and dinner, or by a few rounds of golf. Real relationships are founded on mutual trust. These values grow over time in the context of openness and risk-taking, conflict and respectful confrontation. Such relationships produce a work environment where the best people will thrive and where other star performers will want to work.

Here are some of those strategies that will foster real relationships and a positive work environment. They are straightforward, practical and effective. The mystery is why so many leaders ignore the opportunity to behave more appropriately, and why so many executives and board members charged with choosing leaders keep on picking and promoting mediocre performers who don't behave this way. If you are a new leader, these strategies—appropriately customized and deliberately implemented—will increase your chances of success. While leaders may be born instead of made, leaders can make more of themselves by paying close attention to specific behavioral strategies that are the foundations of positive work environments.

Minimize your moodiness

Leaders' moods are the barometers of organizational life. A furrowed brow, an acerbic retort or a comment with a cutting edge from the boss, and the word is out—a storm is brewing. Clouded expressions warn everyone in the boss's path to take cover. Potentially innovative ideas are banished to the cellar. Windows overlooking the competitive environment are shuttered and people with better ideas put their heads down and retreat to the safety of their cubicles. Sunny dispositions, particularly when consistent, encourage the opposite reactions. The leader's mood is the single most powerful emotional influence on the work environment.

You cannot fake it. Your colleagues will see right through you. This means you must manage your feelings instead of trying to keep up a front. Recognizing, accepting and expressing your feelings are the first steps. Because unpleasant feelings are so painful, you will be inclined to banish these feelings from your consciousness. But unrecognized feelings possess the greatest potential for harm.

After you have faced your feelings and realized that your unpleasant feelings will spread quickly in the work environment, you must find ways to change them. Feelings are not mysterious forces outside your control. Feelings come from what you believe and perceive. If you believe you are powerless, then you will feel helpless. If you perceive that others are intentionally hurting you, then you will feel suspicious. If you believe you can make a difference or manage a difficult situation competently, then you will begin to feel hopeful. When you start to behave like a leader who feels hopeful, you will actually start to feel hopeful. And a feeling of hope will compel you to act more confidently. Your perceptions, your feelings and your behaviors are closely linked. Modify one or more of them, and the others move in tandem. The realization that you can control your perceptions, feelings and behaviors and the impact these powerful forces exert on others is a critical insight that many leaders never acquire.

Inform others when you are distracted

Even the most disciplined leaders will occasionally be unable to shake some underlying preoccupation. As a result, they will appear distracted. Preoccupied leaders fail to listen intently, concentrate poorly, respond curtly and decide impulsively. Because people, particularly subordinates, are exquisitely sensitive to the leader's moods, they are puzzled and often troubled by the change. It is always uncomfortable to be in the company of someone in a funk; this feeling is

amplified by a perceived power deferential. Subordinates often take the leader's bad mood personally. Sensitive colleagues conclude they must have done something wrong. Although notoriously poor at it, people cannot resist the temptation to try to read others' minds. Having reached a conclusion, aspiring mind readers react to their conclusions as if they were facts. This gives rise to all kinds of misunderstandings, overreactions and hurt feelings.

Recognize your preoccupation and announce it to key colleagues. Make it clear that it has nothing to do with them—unless it does. Give a general explanation, but don't burden them with the details. If you are troubled by some issue that involves them, don't deny it. Reassure them that you will discuss your concerns openly as soon as you have thought your position through. Ask them to cut you some extra slack until you have resolved your issues and thank them for their patience and understanding. By taking this approach, you will have relieved some painful uncertainty in the workplace, and you will have modeled a constructive behavioral style they will now be more likely to adopt themselves.

Encourage openness

Unnecessary secrecy is a destructive influence in the work environment. Of course, personal issues should not be discussed openly, but most other demands for confidentiality are quests for personal leverage. Longing for the power they believe secret information confers, conspirators hoard secrets, hoping just to get ahead. These people particularly covet a special relationship with the boss that is based on shared secrets. Those outsiders who learn about or suspect that shared secrets exist are hurt, alienated and forever wary. Paranoid posturing does not make for a positive business environment.

When individuals bring in complaints about their colleagues, interrupt them to ask whether they have discussed their concerns with their colleagues already. If not, insist that they do so. Make it clear to your entire team that going behind each others' backs is not acceptable.

Minimize one-on-one meetings. When issues arise in those meetings that should be considered by the team, offer lobbyists a choice. He can inform other team members himself, or you will. When individuals bring in complaints about their colleagues, interrupt them to ask whether

they have discussed their concerns with their colleagues already. If not, insist that they do so. Make it clear to your entire team that going behind each others' backs is not acceptable. In time, the behind-the-scenes game playing will cease, everyone will relax and the cultural expectation of openness will start to pay measurable dividends.

Adopt a consistent decision-making process

Everyone wants to know how decisions are made in their organizations. For this reason, everyone pays close attention to that process. An unpredictable decision-making process confuses those trying to understand, aggravates those attempting to build their case and confirms the worst fears of those who already suspect that the organization is incompetently led. Impulsive, inadequately-considered decisions usually look pretty stupid in the harsh light of business reality, and they must often be reversed. This is embarrassing for leaders and demoralizing for the entire company. Organizations without a predictable decision-making process are like planes with sputtering engines. The best they can hope for is that they will get the motor humming soon or that the best people will somehow survive the crash landing.

Once you have identified your organization's strategic values and you are "living" the strategic plan, many of the day-to-day decisions become routine. For other decisions, insist that—at a minimum—a pro and con list is presented for the team's consideration. For decisions involving substantial risk, require a full-blown business plan. When decision-making is compromised by emotional arousal, suggest that everyone "sleep on it" before a decision is made. Finally, decide how you will measure the success of the decision before you make it. Those measurements will be critical in your team's future decisions. Nothing is more empowering for people with good ideas than the confident awareness of what kind of case they will need to make, whom they will need to line up for support and the decision-making group to whom the case must be made. Knowing that they can launch their projects without endless second-guessing and burdensome oversight is the engine that drives effective team members to reach for the next performance level. Such an environment is also critical to recruiting and retaining the best people.

Be predictable

People want to know what to expect from their leaders. When similar issues or circumstances elicit dramatically different reactions from the boss depending on the day of the week

or time of day, employees abandon all initiative and merely stand by for the task list of the moment. When the leader says "go," then reverses herself without explanation after the employee leading the charge has invested a hundred hours of work, that employee will think twice about taking on another one of her projects. People know that things change, but they will not tolerate management by whim. Unpredictable leaders keep on diverting their organization's energy stream. Before long, a swamp is all that is left.

Within thirty days of your accepting a new leadership position, everyone around you ought to be able to predict how you will respond in a given situation with 95 percent accuracy.

Start with the simple stuff. Let people know when you will show up and leave and then stick to that schedule. Make sure that key people know where you are and how to reach you at all times. Respond promptly when paged. Greet everyone with the same pleasant demeanor and eye contact every day no matter how you feel. Banish the condescending scowl that so many leaders adopt to make underlings uncomfortable. Be open about your preferences for communication styles so others can figure out how to capture and hold your attention. Make your values clear. Within thirty days of your accepting a new leadership position, everyone around you ought to be able to predict how you will respond in a given situation with 95 percent accuracy.

Insist on fairness

Leaders who favor certain colleagues create a loss-loss situation for themselves and everyone else. Those perceived to be out of favor will meander aimlessly about the organization, sullenly resentful that nothing they do will ever please the boss. Those currently in favor will feel betrayed and turn vindictive when their special status is lost. Leaders convicted of favoritism in the court of employee opinion will always be on parole, never restored to full organizational citizenship. All of those struggling in a work environment tainted by favoritism have lost the opportunity to receive the support and encouragement they deserve based on their accomplishments. Favoritism is a crime against nurture.

Focus on two goals in this regard—avoiding favoritism and the perception that you are showing favoritism. Identify your stars. Don't grant them any special favors. This will

be easy. They won't expect any. Avoiding the appearance of favoritism is more difficult. Pay attention to the suck-ups who spend time in your office. You may dread to see them coming, but everyone else assumes they are in there cutting special deals. Be aware that when you see colleagues socially outside the work environment, a special relationship is widely taken for granted—both by the participants and spectators. Ask your colleagues to avoid using something you have said as a hammer such as, "The boss said she wants that right now," and challenge them when they succumb to that temptation. When you learn that a team member has boasted about a perceived special privilege you have given him, confront that person immediately with the grapevine traffic he has generated. While the most insecure people on your team are the most likely to suspect favoritism and to misinterpret your actions in that light, the truth is that favoritism is often a negative reality in the workplace.

Do not blame others

When things go wrong, everyone's first impulse is to reach out and blame someone. There are reasons for this. Leaders are embarrassed, and someone has usually messed up. Lashing out in anger is the most effective way to appear in command while somebody else comes up with something effective to do. Bystanders and those hurt by the mistake start yelling for someone's head as soon as the initial pain subsides. Furthermore, leaders who indulge in emotional spasms when things go wrong garner a disquieting amount of positive press. Sputtering tantrums are often confused with real leadership, particularly when organizations are successful in spite of bratty leaders. Unfortunately, role models for eruptive leaders are everywhere.

Be different. Most of your colleagues show up every day with an intention to do a good job. They don't enjoy making mistakes any more than you do. Long before you are tempted to make an example out of them, they have been beating themselves. Most mistakes in the workplace are the result of flawed processes, not jackasses. Knowing this, cork your anger and bite your tongue. Instead of asking, "Who did it?" inquire, "What went wrong?" Reassure your red-faced colleagues that nobody is perfect, and ask what you can do to make sure that the broken process is redesigned. Discourage your colleagues from pointing at others by reminding them how it feels to be at the other end of the finger.

Give the credit to others

Leaders take too much credit. It is not that leaders don't deserve some of the credit for organizational success,

but when leaders take personal credit for organizational accomplishments they are missing golden opportunities to share the limelight with key performers who don't get many opportunities to shine. Organizational leaders are always at risk for being seduced by the adulation that position and power evoke in people longing for heroes to worship. This tendency to view senior managers with unjustified awe has given rise to the cult of leadership that entices people to follow their leaders mindlessly, whether that leader is directing his minions to chug cyanide-laced Kool-Aid or to buy additional shares of a company stock that is about to collapse. Leaders who freely give credit to others avoid bloated egos, and create work environments that facilitate individual initiative instead of slavish accommodation. Remain in the background and behind-the-scenes insofar

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as possible. Stay out of the paper and off magazine covers. Avoid television talk shows. Refuse to be photographed without your leadership team or other committed colleagues in the same picture. Invite frontline supervisors and employees to accept organizational awards in your stead. Listen more and talk less. Seize every public opportunity to praise and recognize those who are really getting the work done. You will make many mistakes as a leader, but you will never make a mistake by giving the credit to others.

Set high expectations

Being nice is not enough. The best people want to stretch, to reach for goals that require real effort and that mean something when they are achieved. Drifting quickly leads to boredom, and people not fully engaged in a challenging project will naturally turn their attention to the plentiful annoyances of everyday life. Complaints replace consultation, whining drowns out the reassuring hum of organizational engines performing at peak capacity and the positive work environment becomes contaminated with the frustration that nothing much is happening.

Those leaders who settle for mediocrity because they don't want to upset anyone will eventually upset everyone, while leaders who push the envelope will only upset the drifters who should have been uncomfortable all along.

Identify the leaders in your organization who are always suggesting new projects or encouraging better performance and spend time with them. Pick their brains about how they keep themselves on the edge. Instead of reading the same journals as everyone else, strike out on your own. Find out what the best performers in your industry are measuring, and benchmark your organization's performance against them. Make site visits to successful organizations, make notes, discuss your observations with your colleagues and set goals that you believe can be reached. Become more than an idea person. See your projects through. Select and promote only those leaders who are nice and effective. Tolerating an ineffective leader just because he is nice emphasizes a leadership flaw that slackers will exploit at every opportunity.

Let others know where you stand

Insecure leaders want to keep their options open. They desperately seek the common ground and hold themselves hostage by insisting on consensus. They take pains to agree with everyone. They want to be loved. They tell people what they want to hear. Conflict makes them nervous. Because they are so careful not to disagree openly with others, they appear to vacillate or to remain undecided for extended periods of time. There are compelling reasons not to rush to judgment, but prolonged indecision or the failure to state one's position makes everyone uncomfortable. People need some sense of direction. They want to see that a deliberate and predictable decision-making process is in place, they want to see it work and they want to know where the leader stands.

Except in emergencies, discuss the issues on the table openly and invite thoughtful discussion. Identify the key questions that must be answered, the data that must be considered and the anticipated timeframe for coming up with a position. Once your position is clear, announce it and stick to it. Change that position only if new information warrants reconsideration. If you will adopt certain basic values that drive your decisions, your positions about issues will become increasingly predictable and the overall comfort level in the work environment will improve. Unpredictable leaders who hold their cards close to their vests invite wasteful lobbying efforts, and their uncertainty drives everybody crazy.

Share your enthusiasm

Almost everyone enjoys being around positive, enthusiastic leaders who make no secret of their passion for their work. Good or bad, nothing is more infectious in the work environment than the leader's mood. Even when things are not going particularly well, enthusiastic leaders keep morale high. A positive attitude transforms nagging problems into challenges that will eventually be overcome, setbacks into opportunities, failures into setbacks and distractions into invitations to sharpen organizational focus. Enthusiastic leaders are the hearts of their organizations. They keep everyone pumped.

Don't hide how you feel—so long as you are feeling good. If you feel negative, discouraged or apprehensive, manufacture new feelings or stay out of sight.

Don't hide how you feel—so long as you are feeling good. If you feel negative, discouraged or apprehensive, manufacture new feelings or stay out of sight. This is particularly true when things are not going well. Just the sight of your smiling, confident face will help to convince others that things must not be as bad as they seem. Let others see you laughing and having fun. Tell personal stories that motivate and inspire you. Related with relish, these stories will inspire others too.

Bounce back quickly

There are some leaders who are unfailingly perky, but they annoy more than they inspire. People want to identify with leaders who are real, who struggle with the same sort of aggravations and discouragements as they do. They know that leaders are human, and they are put off when leaders pretend they are not. They don't want to see their leaders stay in a funk too long, though. They want to see a comeback, and they want to see it soon.

Don't permit yourself to wallow in the Sough of Despond too long. Face up to what is bothering you. Figure out what went wrong and accept your feelings. Discuss the issue with a confidant if that will help. Explore your options, and choose the best one. Then, just do it. Move on. Get over it, and make it clear to everyone in the neighborhood that you have gotten over it.

Do nothing in anger

It is normal to get angry, but it is not helpful for leaders to make impulsive decisions or to indulge in irascible behaviors in

If you attempt to communicate while you are angry, your anger will always come through. And your anger is the only message your colleagues will remember

the context of their anger. Never mind that angry leaders are so often lionized in the press and organizational lore. Angry outbursts are stupid and immature, and they are not helpful. Things said and done in anger hurt people. Some of the damage done by such angry diatribes never completely heals. People may cower or jump in the face of a leader's angry outburst, but they don't like it. Fear is less motivational than respect over the long haul, and angry, disrespectful leaders don't generate much respect from others.

First, try not to become angry. It doesn't help. If you become angry, shut your mouth and go into hiding until you get over it. Don't compose email messages. Don't dictate memos. Don't try to solve problems or negotiate contracts. Don't give speeches, make public appearances or attend committee meetings. If you attempt to communicate while you are angry, your anger will always come through. And your anger is the only message your colleagues will remember.

Don't delegate; ask for help instead

Some leaders think the mark of a good leader is how much work she delegates to others. Leaders who take the view that underlings should be doing all of the real work are widely viewed as lazy and incompetent. And that perception will be accurate. Managers who hide behind their rank when there is plenty of work for them to do will eventually lose the skills that got them to the dance, and potential partners will look around for someone else. No one enjoys being dumped on, and they view those who dump on them with a nasty mixture of resentment and disgust. These sentiments do not provide a sound foundation for a productive working relationship.

No matter how high you rise, involve yourself in some real work. That is not to say that leadership is not real work. But people working in the trenches want to see the boss toiling there with them from time to time. When you are in over your head, ask for help. People will be glad to help you. Because genuine requests for help are so well-received and assignments are so poorly-received, use the request strategy as often as possible. Appropriate delegation remains critical to your success as a leader, and asking instead of ordering others to help is the best way to delegate successfully.

Focus on strengths instead of weaknesses

Everyone has assets and liabilities. No one is perfect and, with good intentions and real effort, anyone can improve. And everyone is expected to improve over time. Most organizational leaders package these truisms and expectations with the misguided notion that the most effort ought to be expended on identifying and improving one's weaknesses. This habitual tendency to focus on individual weaknesses during the annual evaluation process demoralizes the workforce, transforms the workplace into a critical environment and wastes enormous energy that might be much better invested. Enlightened leaders focus on strengths, not weaknesses.

Announce your intention to focus on everyone's strengths. Pay no attention to individual weaknesses unless those shortcomings are clearly interfering with the team's functioning. Admit your own weaknesses openly and defer to colleagues who have demonstrated strengths in those areas. Look for opportunities to exploit individual strengths, and encourage other team members to call on their colleagues for help instead of trying to do everything themselves. Dismiss complaints that colleagues are not "well-rounded" with the explanation that, "That's what teams are for." Promote specialization. A high-functioning team of specialists will outperform a bunch of generalists every day of the week.

Remove negative members of the team

This is a painful reality no one wants to face. One bad apple really does spoil the whole bunch. A consistently negative team member saps the group's energy, diffuses focus, turns attention inward and makes everyone else question whether putting a new idea on the table is worth the aggravation. Conversations outside the group consist of gossip instead of consultation. Those looking to this team for leadership realize that the team is crippled, unable to speak with one voice, unwilling to take risks and uncertain about its next steps. Negative team members are organizational tapeworms; they lurk in the organization's guts, consuming energy and bloating themselves while the rest of the team wastes away.

If you are not prepared to remove a team member who is poisoning the work environment, you cannot expect your colleagues to behave any better when they have a difficult decision to make.

Everyone knows who these people are. Their colleagues are hard pressed to explain why they are still around. Negative people survive because their colleagues are afraid to stand up to them, because they hold positional power or because the team leader uses the turmoil they cause to divert attention from his inadequacy. Once you have decided that these negative people are beyond redemption, your job is to get rid of them. Tolerating them is irresponsible. Working around them is exhausting. Ignoring them is impossible. Permitting them to hold the team hostage is inexcusable. Extruding them as quickly as possible is the only acceptable option.

Confront the negative team member about the unacceptable behavior and document that confrontation. Lay out exactly what is expected and when changes must occur. Stick to your guns. Build support among other team members and prop them up when they waver—people always vacillate when something tough has to be done. When the deadline for change has passed without evidence of significant improvement, act. If you are not prepared to remove a team member who is poisoning the work environment, you cannot expect your colleagues to behave any better when they have a difficult decision to make.

Deal forthrightly with painful issues

One of the most significant contributions to a negative work environment is persistently ignoring the pressing issues that are on everyone's minds. Timid leaders avoid facing reality because they don't have the answers, because no easy options have occurred to them or because they are fearful of the conflict that will erupt if they bring the issue out into the open. As a result of this hesitancy, emotional distress grows, misunderstandings abound and rumors about what will happen next multiply. Everyone stays on edge, spooked by every tremor, certain that a major organizational quake will occur at any moment. The surest way to lose control is to fail to take charge.

Invite a group of forthright colleagues to meet with you. Ask them to tell it like it is. Reassure the group that you can take it. Write the issues on a flipchart without making judgmental comments. When the issues are out in the open, invite the group to set priorities. Then get down to work exploring options, setting limits, clarifying expectations and developing action plans and timelines. Thank the participants for their openness, and publicize the group's work widely. Provide regular follow-up to demonstrate that something has actually been accomplished as a direct result of their

straightforwardness. The freedom to speak frankly about any issues that arise in the workplace is one of the most obvious characteristics of positive work environments.

Stay on the offense

It is hard to score while playing defense. There are always plenty of problems to react to, and once an organization has hunkered into a defensive crouch, it is hard to take the offensive. Defensive people permit others to set the tone, take the initiative and to decide what will happen next. This is not a comfortable position to be in. Defenders grow weary, become suspicious and start to find fault with each other. Irritable and sore from the constant assaults they are enduring, they snipe and blame, fret and fume and quickly tire of the game. Defensive people are not happy people.

When questioned, successful teams can recall all kinds of barriers, resistances and failures, but fired up about what they have actually accomplished, they don't dwell on the negative anymore. Positive people are not blind. They just choose not to see certain things.

Go on the offensive even if you have to ignore some the problems in your face. Stymied by realistic limitations, move on to something that can be done. Launch an organizational initiative that you know you can see through. Organize a benchmarking trip to see how successful colleagues have tackled and overcome similar challenges. Stop ruminating about what is impossible and focus on what is possible. When questioned, successful teams can recall all kinds of barriers, resistances and failures, but fired up about what they have actually accomplished, they don't dwell on the negative anymore. Positive people are not blind. They just choose not to see certain things.

Conclusion

We all say we want to work in a positive environment, and we all agree that negative work environments are altogether too common. Why is that? It's the leaders. Leaders set the tone for the work environment. If the work environment is miserable, the organization's leaders are to blame. These leaders are not necessarily bad people. They may just be misguided, inexperienced, timid or ignorant. Of course, some leaders are bad people—controlling, exploitative, demeaning and dishonest. Whether the

leaders in a negative work environment are inept or evil, the negative environment is still their fault.

The good news is that determined leaders can do something about negative work environments. Change begins with intention and is sustained through persistence and personal commitment. Negative leaders have to go. Helpful strategies such as those detailed in this chapter can be employed.

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