

IS BEING HARSH OKAY?

The objective is to build confidence and continuously improve overall employee performance, and not destroy it

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The fresher in the TV News channel was being helped to understand the functioning of the organisation. For a couple of months she was meted out a kid-glove treatment. She picked up the nuances fast enough and the bosses were happy — till one day this happened!

She got the name of a senior Congress leader wrong in one of the news stories that she was working on. Unfortunately for her, the programme went on air at prime time... a slot considered most important by TV channels. Suddenly, all hell broke loose! Her dream run at the news channel came to an abrupt halt. She was shouted at in front of her colleagues; most news channels have an open office. The fresher was in tears. She didn't expect to be shouted at by the same people who were praising her ability to pick up television skills very fast. Getting the politician's name wrong in the news story was definitely a big mistake for the news channel, but could the boss have been kinder? Could he have spoken to her individually and explained the problem?

Many management gurus talk of treating the employee with dignity. They say the best way to get a subordinate to perform well is through motivation.

Even while correcting a mistake they maintain that the bosses should start with mild warnings and then only proceed to stricter actions. However, in many television news channels the production pressure may not give the option of going through these steps. In this field, good and bad work shows immediately. In a sense, due to lack of time, there may not be enough filters to check a mistake. You either get it right or face the flak for having got it wrong. The news editors are particular about getting it right as a mistake in the programme directly impacts the credibility of the channel. The credibility in turn dictates the popularity of the programmes. With every television organisation fighting for the same advertisement pie, and making an effort to grab the eyeballs, the pressure to get it right the very first time is very high. Ask a television editorial boss, and he will tell you that any kind of on-air problem has to be corrected immediately...one more run with same mistake is unpardonable; and since there is no time to issue a show cause notice or ask for an explanation, pulling up the individual in a harsh way seems to be the answer. Many editorial heads in news channels believe in the dictum that reprimanding the junior in front of the office serves the purpose of being an open warning to other employees as well. The morale of one em-



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Employee cannot be the main consideration here. There are many who are waiting to join news channels and those who can bear the pressure only should stay. The old credo, 'Praise in public, criticise in private', does not hold true here. Thanks to this kind of treatment, many employees in television news channels leave the organisation in a huff. Many a time such employees are angry with the way a senior reacts to a certain issue. It is an emotional decision. It is hence not surprising that TV news producers believe being thickskinned and having the

ability to act fast are two key virtues that are a must for television news professionals.

Interestingly, in an interview to Harvard Business Review in 2006, Larry Winget, the author of bestselling book 'Shut up, Stop Whining and Get a Life: A Kick-Butt Approach to a Better Life', said that he believes in talking strict and straight. His mantra has been welcomed by many. Winget, who is called by big companies like IBM, Merck and McDonald for talking to their management heads, says, '...create irritation through high expectations. As a leader,

you should say to employees, "This is how I expect things to be. And if you're not comfortable with that, go somewhere else where less is expected of you." Tough talk works!

The view would find echo with some of the top television channels' editorial heads in India. One of the straight speaking bosses now is a much-respected famous face in the Indian media industry. When he was the news channel's editorial head, his subordinates were too scared of him. The newsroom used to look like an obedient classroom when he was around. To his credit, the channel did exceptionally well under his leadership. The management obviously was very happy, and not surprisingly he kept moving up in his career. Others who worked under him have themselves become senior professionals. Looking at his success they also follow the same style.

So it raises the doubt whether other management gurus are correct in suggesting motivational methods to make employees give better results. Are they correct in claiming that giving employees ample opportunity to develop their creativity and performance which will be good in the long run for them and the organisation? Or, is it that motivational talk works for some jobs, while it's only tough talk that will work for others?

The proponents of motivation swear by their words. They say an employee's mistake should always be pointed out in private. And even during such a one-to-one session, the purpose is to make the person realise the nature of the problem so that he doesn't repeat the mistake again. They also say that a supervisor's attitude towards errors will speak louder to his subordinates than the words he may use. Statements must be directed towards correcting the wrong understanding or interpretation of action that led to the error and not towards personal judgment. The supervisor should use best efforts to never say or do anything that will make the employee feel inadequate. The objective is to build confidence and continuously improve overall employee performance and not destroy it.

There is however, a different school of thought that treating subordinate harshly or not depends on the situations. Prof Mirza Saiyadain, dean at Crescent Business School and an expert in human

resources, says to deal with a subordinate harshly or through motivational methods depends on the employee as well as the job. The soft approach will hardly have an impact on some employees, for such people the boss has no option but to act tough. However, that is not the only situation under which being harsh becomes imperative; there are some job roles where being harsh is the only answer. These jobs generally are the zero-tolerance — front-end positions. These roles give no scope to make a mistake. 'Pressuring subordinates with tough talk works in jobs which are clearly defined, whereas where the work is not clearly defined, being harsh can be counterproductive,' says he. In television news many jobs fall under the zero-tolerance front-end work. Here a mistake not only gets noticed immediately, but is also seen by many simultaneously. For instance, the audience quickly reacts to spelling mistake in a graphics. The mistake may turn them

away from the news report. The mistake will further distract the audience from the crux of the main story.

From the HR and management perspective, dividing roles into ones that have zero tolerance, and others that can be handled with motivational methods seem to be fine; but from the employees' perspective, these definitions may sound hollow. Most newcomers prefer being treated in a dignified way. For them the motivational

methods may give immediate boost to their careers, whereas harsh treatment may change their behaviour. In order to escape the harsh treatment many employees may choose to make a huge effort to please the boss. This can distract the subordinate from doing his job properly. Many employees equate the boss' behaviour to the company's work culture. Obviously, harsh reactions would mean that many believe the company does not have a good work culture. When asked most organisations would say that the success and the work culture of the brand are closely related, but at the ground level there could be a dichotomy. **IM**

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