

Grow as a Manager by Building Strong Relationships

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The relationships that you form with each of your direct reports are central to your ability to fulfill your three core responsibilities as a manager: Create a culture of feedback, build a cohesive team, and achieve results collaboratively.

But these relationships do not follow the rules of other relationships in our lives; they require a careful balancing act. You need to care personally, without getting creepily personal or trying to be a “popular leader.” You need to challenge people directly and tell them when their work isn’t good enough, without being a jerk or creating a vicious cycle of discouragement and failure. That’s a hard thing to do.

When you can care personally at the same time that you challenge directly, you’re on the way to successful leadership. So what can you do to build a good relationship with your direct reports? And what are the pitfalls to avoid?

Don’t focus on socializing. Do listen and care. Rather than endless social events, one of the best ways to build a good relationship with your employees is to make sure they feel heard. I will never forget the words of an HIM colleague who quit a great job less than a year after being hired. Why? With tears in her eyes, she lamented, “Nobody listens to me here.”

So make sure you know what your people are thinking. Solicit feedback from your employees, and show you care. This starts with effective one-on-ones. Make sure your employee sets the agenda, not you. And make listening tangible. Showing that you’re listening is important.

Don’t focus on chitchat. Do focus on feedback. Your employees don’t really want to gab with you about the weather. What they want from their boss is somebody who can help them grow professionally. People grow most when they make mistakes. This means that you’ll build better relationships by sharing your feedback—both praise and criticism. Praise your employees early, often, and in public. Be specific about what was good and why. Be sincere—if you don’t mean it, don’t say it.

Don’t focus on perks. Do focus on achieving results collaboratively. A free lunch feels empty if your team is not achieving results or if their contributions to success are not recognized. Perks can reflect and reinforce a culture, but they can’t create it.

More important is taking the time to help people on your team nurture new ideas, creating a culture of debate, making it clear who owns decisions and why, bringing others along, ensuring that employees have time to execute, and being open to admitting mistakes and learning from them. This is how you achieve results collaboratively. Your relationships deepen with collaboration, not with extra perks.

Don’t be promotion-obsessed. Do focus on career conversations. Helping employees achieve career goals will certainly help you build better relationships. Understand what motivates your employees. Ask them about their dreams of the future to learn what skills they need to develop. Together, develop a career action plan that is focused on the employee’s motivations and life goals, rather than a narrow and uninspiring focus on the next promotion.

Hopefully these tips will help you build strong relationships with each of your direct reports and will help you grow as a leader and inspire your employees.

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