

Walk the fine line: How a manager can balance effective leadership with being well liked



Being a manager requires that you strike a number of sensitive balances with your team and peers: You want to develop authentic and respectful relationships, while maintaining professional boundaries.

You're also tasked with simultaneously providing employees with feedback, direction and support, while empowering them to be accountable.

It's a tall order for managers of all experience levels, and one that can prove a constant challenge.

Yet it may also be one of the most critical management skills to develop, particularly given the direct correlations that exist between employees' relationships with management and the impact that can have on employee engagement, productivity, and job satisfaction.

Here are some ways you can strike a balance between being a well-liked, yet effective leader.

Give feedback employees can use. Companies like General Electric and The Gap have replaced the traditional annual performance review for an ongoing feedback loop between employees, managers and peers.

Though their approaches to managing ongoing performance-related communications differ, they share a common objective: To empower employees with real-time feedback they can apply and implement in order to course-correct, or otherwise succeed.

You can adopt the fundamentals of this approach with your own team with consistent, employee-manager meetings that address performance on current projects and tasks—even if your company hasn't moved away from traditional performance reviews.

Say what you mean, and mean what you say. The criticism you deliver should be constructive, but don't water down your feedback; dance around issues; or avoid uncomfortable topics about performance, expectations or critical skills that may be lacking with the intent to "spare" the employee's feelings.

If an employee is doing a fantastic job, tell him why. If there's room for improvement, tell him in no uncertain terms with language that is direct, objective and supported by examples and facts. The employee should walk

away from the conversation understanding exactly what the issue is, and how he can correct it with your support.

Don't minimize your feedback with weak language like "maybe we need to" or "do you think?"

Not every conversation you have as a manager will be positive; tell employees the truth, keep them informed, and give them the tools and coaching they need to move forward.

Commit to the feedback you deliver. A manager's role isn't unlike the coach of a sports team: Hone your team's individual and collective skills, guide them to success and help them make the feedback you provide actionable.

If you tell an employee her behavior or professional skill set needs improvement, you're as accountable as the employee for remedying the situation.

In some cases, that may mean encouraging the employee to take additional training courses. Other circumstances may require that you and the employee adjust his or her workload, or responsibilities.

Have nothing but praise for your employees? It's still your job to engage with them consistently: Assign projects that challenge them creatively, cultivate their engagement and develop their professional talents based on their goals.

Make your people the priority. Management expert Russ Landor, co-founder of Candor, Inc., explains that genuine employee-manager relationships are built when managers put employees' needs ahead of their own.

Be curious about your employees, and commit to finding out what they need, what they don't, and why (understanding that the answers to these questions will shift constantly with the employees' workload, skill set, roles and responsibilities).

"Listen to their hopes, their fears, their dreams, but also listen to their ideas for improving the team, the work, the environment. All the answers are there on the team. You just have to ask," writes Landor.

He also stresses that your manager title doesn't inherently equate to authority or respect, in the eyes of your employees. Over time, that relationship is earned when you consistently show employees they are your top priority, through your words, listening skills and actions.