

Corner office career advice: Open office plans, phony deadlines and homework

Are the trends of open office plans and assigned business books a good idea? Our veteran CEO provides an opinion, as well as some inspiration for reviving your leadership skills.

Open office plan, open mutiny

Q. Two months ago our office switched to an open office plan, which was partly my idea. And guess what? Everyone pretty much hates it. How do I salvage this situation when reverting back to the old way would shine so much light on my bad decision?

A. Bad decision? Maybe not. We must remember that people organically adapt to their circumstances; it just takes time, sometimes a lot of it. Two months isn't enough to determine the long-term changes that the new plan will bring. I'll bet anything that the staff, given no option but to work with what they've got, will soon begin to develop little efficiencies and subtle adaptations no one could predict. The entire culture will eventually be reshaped in small ways, and it's likely that in a year, it'll be strange to think of the "old" layout. If you believed in the original vision, be firm with it. Let people mature into the scheme.

Say goodbye to yesterday

Q. Since last fall I've made a few big decisions that backfired for our organization. I'm starting to doubt my ability to lead. How can I regain my edge?

A. You've got to become a page-turner. Make a bad decision yesterday? Well, that was *yesterday*. It's gone, much like your ill-fated eighth grade crush and many terrible haircuts. What are you going to do *today*?

It takes exactly one success to make everyone forget the past. Think of an NFL team that goes 8-8 but manages a playoff berth. Who's thinking about their iffy record now? No one. Say to yourself: "That's where I'm at every day. It's been a tough year, but now I'm in the playoffs, and the team needs a plan ... *and I've got one.*"

Oh, these people...

Q. Over the years I've become more annoyed by certain idiosyncrasies in others: fidgeting, casual tardiness, whispery voices, terrible grammar, etc. Little things like this make me seethe. How do I snap out of it?

A. Working with the same people for several years did this to me. I tried to see these triggers as aspects of an imaginary workplace comedy in which I was the noble protagonist, suffering fools left and right. It helped me see the lighter side of people's absurdities. But what helped most was seriously taking stock of my own. You see, I realized I'm a guy who can't stop saying "um" and "cool," who chews too loud, and who is too quick to share his own anecdotes in a conversation. Fact is, everyone's got three idiosyncrasies that might rub people the wrong way. Spot yours—and embrace them, they're part of you.

Homework should stay in school

Q. I noticed a lot of companies assigning business books for employees to read and discuss, so I tried it here, and everyone seems unenthused. Have I latched unwisely onto a fad that doesn't have a lot of merit?

A. I'm seeing this trend a lot too, and while I can see some very good discussions rising from it, there's one thing I never did as CEO: Assign homework. By doing so, I thought I would be crossing a very important line and inserting company business into people's private time. I always tried to remind myself that this time should be inviolable, and that if it wasn't, morale would suffer. People need to feel they're leaving the office behind when they go home at night. A company that keeps a stranglehold on employees' minds is going to run into some resentment.

The first clue was the due date March 32nd

Q. For years, I've set phony deadlines for my project teams. I build in a buffer, but they don't know that. Lately, they're starting to suspect I'm forcing them to make a false deadline. Should I level with them?

A. My advice is to let them know what you can and cannot control—and how that factors into your deadline. When I set deadlines for my team, I add, "Here's how I arrived at this date" and list my reasons. Transparency really does build trust, although some folks may still bristle at having to rush to meet a "fake" deadline.