

Strike the nurturer-disciplinarian balance

Like great coaches, the best bosses adopt a tough-love leadership style. They're both drill sergeants and sensitive, supportive sounding boards.

It's not easy straddling the line between disciplining employees and nurturing them. The key: Never shake their confidence to the point that they're riddled with doubt about their abilities. Other tips:

Stick to standards. Define the level of performance you expect— and reinforce it. Set challenging but reasonable standards of performance, and reward people for meeting or exceeding them.

Reserve harsh discipline for those who loaf. Rally the rest of the troops with firmness and determination, while gently guiding workers who try but struggle to succeed.

“Read” your people. Customize your leadership. If certain workers buckle whenever you yell, don't yell. Discipline them in a quiet, steely voice.

On the flip side, realize that some people don't want to be nurtured. They may rebel if you show interest in their professional growth because they lack self-esteem or question your motives. Simply listen to these employees—without dishing out advice or small talk.

Give tough love. You may think nurturing is simple: Just nod sympathetically, pat your employee on the back and say “hang in there.” But if you do that too much, staffers may grow to depend on it. You may lose the edge you need to prod them to accomplish more.

If they get hooked on your compliments, withhold some praise. When you do express admiration, pinpoint a skill or trait that's especially important to the company. Rewards can be tailored to the employee's desires and value system, but the performance must reflect what the employer wants.

Nurturing versus enforcing

Strive to show support while playing the hard-nosed enforcer by exhibiting both sets of characteristics:

Nurturers:

- Acknowledge a job well done with praise and incentives.
- Express faith in an employee's ability to improve.
- Cheer up employees who are too self-critical.
- Show excitement when workers master a new skill or overcome a hardship.

Enforcers:

- Do not accept excuses.
- Discipline by referring to clear, measurable standards.
- Met out fair, consistent punishment that comes as no surprise.