

The Movie Scene Every Manager Should Watch... But Might Be Afraid To

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While TV shows like *The Office* and cartoon strips like *Dilbert* make us laugh at the absurdity of work life, there's a movie scene that captures the dark underbelly of manager/employee relations. It's a scene that gets played out, metaphorically, millions of times a day throughout America.

I try to include this story whenever doing management training, because it illustrates several essential principles that busy managers need to keep in mind if they want high levels of employee engagement and morale.

Given that Gallup's research reveals only 26% of employees report being highly engaged – i.e. only one out of four cares about helping their employer succeed – improving employee engagement should be on every manager's "to do" list.

Part of the solution to improving engagement and morale lies in becoming more mindful of manager/employee moments of truth that lead to disengagement, and recognizing how much these mishandled moments cost both the manager and the employer.

The Movie Scene Every Supervisor, Manager, and Executive Should See

The scene comes from the movie *Casino*. In the movie, Joe Pesci plays a mobster who owns, surprisingly enough, a casino. His brother runs a nearby restaurant.

Now here's the scene...

We All Get Along...

The scene opens with a small group of Las Vegas police officers milling about cash register in the brother's restaurant. They're chatting with the employees as they wait for their lunchtime take out. It's clear from their interactions with the restaurant workers that this is a frequent occurrence and they all get along well.

When the scene is over, you realize that the police officers get their lunches for free. It's one of the perks of their power. However, the restaurant owner and his staff don't mind being leaned on for the free meals. They understand that this is just part of doing business in this town, especially if you are more than a bit on the shady side and don't want to be hassled by the law.

...Or Not...

The scene shifts to the kitchen where the staff puts together the sandwiches. They slice the bread, put on the salami, the cheese, the tomatoes, the olive oil, and then – pfffttt - the spit. Yes, each sandwich gets a hefty dose of saliva.

Next, we see the wait staff give the police officers their free lunch with big, friendly smiles. The police officers stroll out of the restaurant with their booty, totally unaware of what had been added to their order.

Welcome to the Workplace

As I reflected on this rather revolting scene, I found myself thinking:

“Welcome to the workplace”.

This drama gets played out millions of times everyday in organizations large and small. Employees spit in their boss’s sandwich and in their employer’s sandwich, and neither their boss nor their employer realize it.

These same bosses and senior managers also don’t realize how their actions create an environment that triggers the desire to retaliate.

As I’ve reflected on and worked with this scene as a teaching tool, I find that it offers several useful principles that any manager wishing to increase employee morale and employee engagement would be wise to consider.

Moral of the Story #1: If Employees Don’t Have Positive Control, They’ll Find a Way to Exert Negative Control

Although the restaurant workers and owner didn’t have control over whether they gave out the free lunch – at least if they wanted to be in the good graces of the police officers – they found a way to feel some sense of control over the experience. In this case, they found a way to punish their nemeses, while all the while smiling to their faces.

Of the many human drives that influence employee behavior in the workplace, I believe the most important one for managers to understand and work with is the innate drive for control, or more precisely, the drive to avoid feeling helpless.

The need to feel a sense of control over one’s experience – to not feel out of control and helpless – affects just about every aspect of employee behavior and performance.

The Need For Control: Hard-wired Into Our Brains

Decades of research with humans and laboratory animals shows that when organisms experience helplessness – i.e. a lack of control – they experience anxiety, fear, or terror, depending on the degree of helplessness. This makes sense because in the natural world, if you’re helpless, you’ll soon be dead. Thus, we have a natural aversion to feeling out of control and will scratch and claw to regain some semblance of control.

If employees don’t feel like they have a say at work, if they don’t feel like management listens to their input or concerns, or if changes are forced upon them without their input being considered, they feel helpless. This feeling of helplessness triggers anxiety, which triggers efforts to achieve control in whatever way they can.

One of the most common examples of employees resorting to negative control takes place in poorly executed change initiatives: more specifically, when management doesn’t ask employees for input on changes that directly affect their jobs, and/or thrusts change on them without forewarning.

These two practices naturally lead employees to feel like the change is being “done to” them, which leads them to feel like they have no control over the situation. Once the change begins though, they find ways to exert control by fighting it every inch of the way, and by finding ways to ensure its failure. Because they weren’t given any positive control, they found ways to exert negative control.

The Many Forms Negative Control Can Take

Think back to jobs you’ve had where you:

1. Didn’t have much – or any – say about how you got to do your job.

2. Felt like your boss didn't care about your well-being or how you were doing, because he or she never listened to any of your concerns, requests for what you needed to do your job well, or had a "just deal with it" attitude.
3. Had a boss who micromanaged or just seemed to need to be in control all the time.
4. Felt management as a whole didn't care about the employees, so there was no use in voicing concerns, offering input, etc.

If you're like most people, you despised the feeling of helplessness these situations created. You also, if you're like most people, found ways to feel a sense of control over your work life, even if it wasn't in the most positive way.

Some of the common ways employees exert negative control include:

- Taking "mental health days"
- Not putting forth full, honest effort
- Not implementing changes while waiting for management to "get over it" and move on to the next big idea
- Not offering ideas that could make processes work better
- Filing spurious workers comp claims
- Withholding project update information from their boss (a response to micromanaging and managerial hovering)

Moral of the Story #2: Power May Bring Immunity From Feedback... But Not Reality

This is a critical message for anyone in a position of power to absorb and remember. In the movie, the police officers had the power – or

at least overt power. Because of that, they didn't get any direct feedback from the restaurant workers or owner. No one said: "You know, it really bugs us that you lean on us for the free food." The restaurant workers and owner were smart enough to realize that giving this feedback would not be in their best interest.

Because of their position power, the police officers didn't get feedback about the price they were paying for their overbearing behavior. Without this feedback, they operated under a costly illusion:

"The illusion of consequence-free behavior"

Without feedback, over time a person in power can grow to believe that they can act with impunity. They can begin to believe that they can act harshly, unkindly, or disrespectfully to others without consequence.

When I've witnessed the most senior manager in a meeting speak in subtly demeaning ways to their subordinates, or flaunting the power differential, I've found myself thinking "Do they realize the price THEY are paying? Do they think that just because no one's challenging them, there's no fallout?"

It's Like Disrespectful Parenting

It's like parents of small children who speak disrespectfully to their children or take out their moods on them. Just because the small child doesn't dare say "That's really mean. I hate it when you talk that way to me" doesn't mean the child is not affected by their parent's behavior.

While the parent might not get feedback indicating the consequences of how they are treating their child (until, the child becomes a teen), there are consequences nonetheless -- consequences both to the child and to the parent/child relationship.

More Power = Less Feedback

The greater the power an individual has, the less feedback they receive from others about how their behavior affects those around them. Thus, most CEOs get less honest feedback, less reality-testing, than most supervisors. This makes it even more important for higher level managers to learn how to encourage feedback.

No News Is Not Good News

If employees don't feel safe enough to speak up about how management's decisions make it hard for them to do their jobs well, or what management does that makes them believe they're not valued and respected, it's easy for management to believe that all is well. If no one says "It really bugs me that you never consulted us about this change" or "I hate it when you talk down to us" the manager, or management as a whole, can mistakenly believe that everything is fine or that missteps went unnoticed.

If You Don't Know About It, You Keep Doing It

Doing employee focus groups over the years has repeatedly impressed upon me how tightly employees can hold onto anger, hurt, and resentment for years over incidents they never complained about to their boss or HR. Time and again I've listened to employees recount, blow by blow, situations where they felt disrespected by their boss or their employer, but had never spoken up.

Thus, their boss -- or management as a whole -- has no idea of what they have done, or continue to do, that damages employee engagement.

So, If You Don't Want Employees To Spit In Your Sandwich...

1. Make it comfortable for employees to speak honestly. The more safe people feel speaking up, the less they feel the need to express their discontent through counterproductive behavior and

disengagement. The next two items in this list will help you do this.

2. Institute both informal and formal processes for encouraging employees to speak up. A common practice among companies with high morale and high productivity is for management to check in with employees every now and then and ask "Is there anything we're doing that drives you crazy?" Supervisors should make it a regular practice to ask employees questions about how they are doing, if there's anything they can be doing to help the employee do their job, and similar questions.

I always recommend to managers attending my seminars to let their team know that they are going to be trying new and better ways of supervising, and let them know some of the areas they plan on working on. This removes any of the awkwardness that comes from wondering if team members will think -- or say -- "You're just doing that because you went to that seminar." By being up front with it, you remove the wondering and the awkwardness.

In addition to the informal check-ins, high performing companies have town hall meetings where frank discussions are encouraged. They also conduct employee surveys and...

...report back to employees the findings, what is being done, what won't be acted on and why. As you know from personal experience, few things engender greater feelings of "Why bother to speak up?" and helplessness, than conducting an employee survey and then doing nothing with the results, including not bothering to report back to employees what you heard.

3. Help your supervisors and managers learn how to make it safe for people to speak candidly with them¹. Except for the most assertive individuals who don't edit themselves regardless of who they're talking to, most people learn early on to "choose their battles" when it comes to confronting their boss or senior management. Unfortunately, all those conversations that don't happen come with a cost: employee disengagement.

When employees don't feel like they have to weigh the pros and cons of speaking up, but can talk candidly with their boss or to senior management, they're more likely to provide you with the information you need to address the situation that is creating distress. By doing this, you get employees who can focus on their work, not on the things that make it hard for them to do their jobs well. You also minimize turnover.

4. Hold everyone accountable for their behavior. In his irreverently titled book *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't*, Dr. Robert Sutton of Stanford University reminds us of the price companies pay for allowing rude, abusive, toxic behavior to go unchecked. Few things lead to a greater desire for revenge than being treated disrespectfully.

Yet, many organizations show spaghetti spines when it comes to holding people accountable for rude, uncivil behavior. The results of this stance are predictable. Just as children learn what they can get away with and what they can't by the responses – or non-responses – of others, so do adults behaving badly.

For many companies, establishing clear boundaries and consequences related to disrespectful behavior would be one of the most useful first steps in improving employee morale and engagement. Companies with a climate of respect and civility don't have a workforce who is always looking for opportunities to pay back their tormentors. Instead, their employees focus their attention on doing a good job.

5. Make sure employees have as much positive control over their jobs as possible. For those who haven't yet demonstrated the maturity, responsibility, or skill to warrant a great deal of decision-making authority, work with them on a professional development plan. Show them how they can earn the expanded autonomy.

If you do these things, your employees won't be spending their time looking for opportunities to spit in your sandwich, but instead, will be looking for opportunities to make a difference and help your organization succeed.

About the Author: David Lee is the founder and principal of HumanNature@Work. He is an internationally recognized authority on organizational and managerial practices that optimize employee performance, morale, and engagement. Mr. Lee is the author of *Managing Employee Stress and Safety*, as well as several dozen articles on organizational and individual performance that have been published in a number of trade journals in North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia.

For information on his services, or for more of his articles, go to HumanNatureAtWork.com.

¹ For information on how to do this, refer to "How to Start Difficult Discussions Off Right" in the Articles section of HumanNatureAtWork.com

Comments about David Lee's Work:

"Thank you for doing such an outstanding job keynoting our conference. As you could tell by the response, participants loved both the content and the delivery of your presentation."

Dr. Ian Gawler, Director, The Gawler Foundation, Victoria, Australia

"I've now worked with over 150 presenters since you last were a part of MEBSR's Spring Conference, and still you stand out as the best person we've ever had come and present on how we best work with one another, increase productivity and thrive."

Sanna McKim, Executive Director, Maine Businesses for Social Responsibility, ME

"It was a sheer delight to sit back and listen, learn and laugh as David weaved his extensive knowledge of the material with his abundant practical wisdom generously sprinkled with personal reflections, stories and his own wholesome humor. David brings a rare blend of practical knowledge and genuine humanity to his presentations. One cannot help but leave his sessions smarter, and a better human being, as he has a way of touching one's heart as well as one's head."

Bill Gaertner, MD, Wisconsin

"I was inspired by David's presentation. As onboarding new ladies and gentlemen at the Ritz-Carlton, Hotel Company LLC is one of the cornerstones of our success, I cannot agree more with his statement that, 'Everything you do in onboarding matters'."

Diana Oreck, Vice President Global Learning & Leadership Center, Ritz Carlton, Maryland

David, I wanted to thank you for being part our show in Las Vegas. The feedback I have received about your sessions was fantastic!!!!!! Three cheers to you.

Julie McNeney, COO, International Council on Active Aging, Vancouver, BC

"Having seen a lot of speakers, I can't tell you just how impressed I was by David. I even waited in line to talk with him... I learned a great deal and laughed my butt off in the process... When we have someone who is so genuine and so well prepared, we owe it to each other to spread the word.... I take it very seriously when I recommend someone else's work and... he's great!"

Naomi Judd

"David's unique blend of humor and professionalism provides an engaging forum to absorb the content of his presentation. David does not hesitate to encourage participation and captures the audiences attention consistently throughout the seminar. I left the seminar feeling that this experience was well worth the time and money."

Dennis Hebert, Jr., President, Merrimack Valley Chapter of the NH Credit Union League, NH

"David's presentation style is unparalleled! The substantive and timely content of his subject materials is immediately adaptable to the workplace making his seminars an invaluable aid to an employer seeking to be an "Employer of Choice."

Lynn M. Lombard, VP, MMG Insurance Company, ME

"I can honestly say that your sessions were highlights for me at the conference. Since then I have perused your website and read many of the articles posted on there. Again, thank you and kudos to you for the great presentation!"

Rob Huppée, Amica Mature Lifestyles Inc., Vancouver, British Columbia