

CUBICLE CULTURE

By JARED SANDBERG



Avoiding Conflicts, The Too-Nice Boss Makes Matters Worse

Lowrie Beacham didn't like confronting people or making decisions that favored one staffer over another, including the time two of his people were vying to be in charge of the new fitness center.

"Instead of having one bad day and getting over it, it went on for literally years," he recalls. "You just kick the can a little farther down the road -- 'Let's have a meeting on this next month' -- anything you can try to keep from having that confrontation."

Anytime his employees bristled at his gentle criticisms, he'd change the subject: "You're getting to work on time; that's wonderful!" he'd say, "Never mind that your clients say you're difficult to work with."

What resulted was a dysfunctional department, he admits, "with no discipline, no confidence in where they stood, lots of scheming and kvetching, backstabbing." He gave up his management role. "I'm extremely happy not managing," he says.

DISCUSS



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If you've ever dealt with a non-confrontation manager, how did you remedy any of these problems?

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The bad manager tends to conjure images of the blood-vessel-bursting screamer looking for a handle to fly off. But these types are increasingly rare. Far more

common, and more insidious, are the managers who won't say a critical word to the staffers who need to hear it. In avoiding an unpleasant conversation, they allow something worse to ferment in the delay. They achieve kindness in the short term but heartlessness in the long run, dooming the problem employee to nonimprovement. You can't fix what

you can't say is broken.

"In a knowledge economy, where work is more complex and interdependent, people need feedback more -- what they particularly need feedback on are on things that are difficult to give: one's interpersonal style," says David Bradford, a lecturer at Stanford's Graduate School of Business.

John Hardcastle, formerly in financial reporting, was one of the countless people who, surveys show, want to learn and improve. But every time he had to submit a report and asked for feedback, his boss couldn't say anything negative. "He would visibly dance around the aspects of my reports that needed improvement," he says. "I never really knew exactly where I stood."

Bosses who want to avoid any discomfort, "use generalities so people really don't know what they're talking about," says Laura Collins, an HR consultant. Instead, they tend toward one-size-fits-all comments: "pay a little more attention to detail" and "improve the way you communicate" and "develop better organization skills."

Those were the ones Ryan Broderick, formerly an assistant account executive in advertising, heard from a boss. The substanceless nature of his feedback stuck him with one of the worst performance-related torments: Being left to your own imagination. "Hearing nothing is worse than hearing something," he said.

It makes one pine for the boss who throws venomous tirades. "Those kinds of people may not control their emotions but at least they're honest about it," says James Fuller, an IT project manager whose former boss didn't assign him any projects for six months and never hashed out why.

Such avoidance is a recipe for an employee blindsiding. During the year she worked for one such boss, Maxine Erlwein got glowing 90-day and six-month reviews, and held daily meetings with her boss to whom she'd tell her plans. Then, in the annual review, her former boss "tried to claim my performance was not meeting any of the minimum requirements of the position," she says. The stress leveled her appetite, memory and sleep. "Nonconfrontational people will nurse a grudge," she says.

No one appreciates the deceptive peace and quiet. Lawrence Levine, program analyst, has witnessed a colleague spending much of his day on eBay, among other online time-killers. There's no doubt the supervisor saw it, too. It mystified the staff.

"We all pondered in the absence of any action why the heck this person drawing a decent salary was allowed to do this stuff," he says. "The anger was that all the rest of us were evaluated on what we produced."

But John Traylor, a chief engineer who once experienced a similar frustration over a lazy colleague, sees a different side now that he's a conflict-avoiding manager himself. He hates to give an employee news that would "crush his spirit."

He even once quietly arranged to have an employee transferred at the request of others. "He could leave with the dignity of having been asked by higher levels to move to a more important project -- and I didn't have to confront the real issue," he says.

He concedes that his handling didn't help the employee improve. He also says that the management training he received from the company didn't teach him how to deal with such conflict. "It would have been helpful," he says.

One IT manager at an insurance company who didn't want to be identified as the guy who confirmed our worst fears, also admits to a tendency to avoid battles. But he blames a system in which such clashes just cause HR headaches.

He wishes it were otherwise. "I'd rather be mean once to one person than cause this unrest across the team," he says.

As it stands, he adds, "it's a horrible cycle, because now I have even more work to keep everyone else happy."

• Email me at Jared.Sandberg@wsj.com³. For a discussion on today's column, go to WSJ.com/Forums⁴.

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