



BY DAVID BENTLEY

David Bentley is the author of *NAKED LEADERSHIP* Leadership that works ... It's that simple! For more information visit www.nakedleadership.com.au

PLAYING FAIR IN THE WORKPLACE

David Bentley strips bare the facts of fair and effective leadership

Have you ever wondered what employees want from you as a leader? If you're a senior manager, what about your direct reports, what do they need from you?

Over the last seven years I have asked thousands of my class participants these very questions. Interestingly, regardless of the country or cultural background, the list always seems to be the same.

They want a leader who: listens, is approachable, fair, consistent, keeps them informed, shows appreciation, supports them, is positive, follows up, is trustworthy, accessible and lets them know where they stand. The requirements don't vary from line employees to senior managers. It seems we all want the same things from our boss.

When I then ask which two are the *most* important, the answer is almost always fairness and consistency.

In fact, the fastest way to destroy morale in your workplace is to apply different standards to different people, yet the real trap here is that sometimes we are not aware that we're doing this and it can get us into real trouble.

When I act as a leadership coach or even as an employee advocate in disciplinary meetings, it is often immediately apparent that the leader has a detectable emotional involvement in the outcome.

In other words, an employee has made a mistake and it is obvious the leader is angry or upset about it. Worse still, they may visibly dislike the employee. This usually means that their judgment and actions are less than objective.

The challenge here is that we as leaders are still *very* human, and people and their actions can upset us.

Reality check: mistakes are a part of life. In order to prevent recurrence, we have to understand how they came about. Simply hitting people over the head when they screw up is ineffective and counterproductive.

We must accept that there is a dramatic difference between holding people accountable, ie discussing and resolving issues, and blaming and punishing. One solves problems and the other creates defensiveness and, usually, more poor performance.

Holding people accountable means looking at how the problem occurred, whether or not we (yes, we) had any part in the process via poor instructions or unclear expectations, and then applying a remedy. This means being objective, and objectivity means that we must remove our emotions from the equation.

In our *NAKED LEADERSHIP*[®] classes, we spend considerable time exploring and practising what I call 'disconnecting'. The idea is that leaders must separate their personal feelings about people and issues from their actions. It's a bit like an umpire working at being completely unbiased during a match, no matter how much they may personally favour one team over another. Without disconnecting, we can't help the employee because our annoyance will taint our objectivity and any trust we may enjoy will evaporate.

In order for an employee to improve, they must understand *and accept* what is happening and take on-board the need for change. If they feel that you are 'after them' it will only cause defensiveness and more problems. They will somewhat justifiably carry a grudge and the rest of the team will usually side with them.



NAKED TRUTH

How do we make this transformation? Here are seven 'naked' hints:

1. Become an observer of yourself. Learn to detect when your feelings are influencing you.
2. It's okay for you to be (privately) annoyed for a minute, but take a deep breath and disconnect.
3. How you feel about someone is irrelevant. Fairness and consistency *must* rule your actions.
4. Remember that as a leader you are a coach and umpire, not judge and executioner. (A coach can still bench people when necessary.)
5. If you are good to people, they will return the favour. If you are cruel to people, they will return the favour.
6. Replacing employees is expensive. Be future focussed and save yourself more work by looking at prevention *not* punishment.
7. Remember that no one screws up all of the time. Gain balance by looking for the good stuff.

However, I have seen almost miraculous transformations take place when a troubled employee or junior leader came to understand that the boss was on their side. That is; that they were there to help, not to 'get rid of them'. **HC**