Respect: How Managers Can Deliver What Workers Want

By Kathleen Doheny

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RESPECT. Aretha Franklin knew its value and demanded it.

Recent surveys suggest that workers want it, too, but many aren’t getting it. And when they don’t get it, many leave. Last year, nearly 48 million U.S. workers left their jobs (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/talent-acquisition/Pages/interactive-quits-level-by-year.aspx), and lack of respect appears to be a significant reason.

- One in 11 workers, or about 10 percent, said they feel disrespected by the supervisors to whom they report, according to a survey (https://www.self.inc/info/employee-appreciation/) of more than 1,200 adults conducted in February 2022 by Self Financial, a financial technology company in Austin, Texas, that helps people build credit. And 11 percent said they feel disrespected, overall, by the company for which they work.

- Most workers who quit a job in 2021 cited low pay, no opportunities for advancement or feeling disrespected as a reason for departing, according to a February 2022 survey (https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/03/09/majority-of-workers-who-quit-a-job-in-2021-cite-low-pay-no-opportunities-for-advancement-feeling-disrespected/) by Pew Research Center of 965 people who left their jobs voluntarily. Of the 57 percent who cited lack of respect as a reason, 35 percent said it was a major reason while 21 percent said it was a minor reason along with other concerns.

- A 2021 survey (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/23294884211016529) polling more than 1,000 early-career workers ages 21 to 34 found that they now place more value on respectful communication than on work perks they previously favored more. These findings aren’t traced to pandemic re-evaluation; previous surveys have found that workers consistently value being respected on the job. In 2016, a Society for Human Resource Management survey (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/2016-job-satisfaction-and-engagement-survey.aspx) found that respectful treatment at work is the most important factor contributing to job satisfaction.

- Fostering a work environment of respect not only reduces friction, experts said, but also increases productivity, reduces resignations and makes managers look like better leaders.

Respect: Owed, Eamed

Managers should know that respect comes in two forms: owed and earned, said Kristie Rogers, associate professor of management at Marquette University in Milwaukee, whose research focuses on respect.

"I coined the terms 'owed' and 'earned' because they seemed fitting for the world of work, where employees ideally experience a foundation of owed respect for all members of the company and also experience earned respect above and beyond that when they meet or exceed expectations," Rogers said.
Why are both kinds of respect so important? "Employees need and value respect because it satisfies universal social needs to feel like we belong and feel we are positively regarded by others," Rogers said.

She also differentiates between disrespect and a lack of respect.

"Employees feel disrespected when others act in ways that violate or undermine their worth," she said. "Disrespect is often tied to instances of incivility or mistreatment, is perceived as intentional or malicious, and is especially impactful when it comes from a manager." On the other hand, a lack of respect is simply an absence of acknowledging someone's worth.

Who Gets It Right?

Rogers first studied respect at Televerde, a technology-focused marketing firm based in Phoenix and staffed mainly by inmates from an Arizona women's prison. The employees call on businesses on behalf of Televerde's clients, attempting to make appointments with the clients' sales teams. After 15 months studying this work program, Rogers discovered some of the reasons that the women felt respected.

The women, for instance were addressed by name in a respectful way, never as an "inmate" or by an inmate number.

Managers told the women about opportunities for professional development, such as getting specialized work training. They encouraged the women to prepare for life after release, including submitting a business plan they felt excited about and getting feedback from managers about those plans. Managers encouraged experienced employees to mix with and help newcomers, who were always urged to ask questions.

Managers also publicly recognized achievements such as passing a typing test or doing well on phone interviews.

Blueprint for Fostering Respect

Here's how other leaders suggest building an environment of respect:

N2Publishing—"Respect can't be faked," said Duane Hixon, CEO and co-founder of N2Publishing, a Wilmington, N.C., publisher of more than 650 neighborhood publications. "Either the leadership team truly believes all are created equal, or they believe they [the leaders] are 'more equal' than others."

He conceded that not every employee has the same impact on a team, but he said everyone still deserves the same respect. "When company leaders help others accomplish their goals, respect is felt."

How to foster more respect? Simple things, he said. "Knowing the names of your teammates is foundational."

While it's difficult for a manager of large teams to know everyone, he suggested working to know most.

"We have almost 1,000 full-time people, and I know about 500 names and faces. I study them, I review them. Because when people are known, they feel respected and valued." If knowing the entire team is impossible, "your leaders should know their direct reports, and everyone should be known by someone."

Write thank-you notes for workers' contributions, he suggested. Not by e-mail, but with an old-school, handwritten note. Two other easy ways to communicate respect, Hixon said, are to make eye contact when possible and to listen.

Edmunds.com—"We recognize the individuality of our employees and the fact that they have varied perspectives and experiences that collectively contribute to a more dynamic organization," said Jamie Epstein, chief people officer for Edmunds, an online car shopping guide in Santa Monica, Calif.
The company also trusts employees to do great work. Edmunds believes in its "Results Only Work Environment," which emphasizes results and goals achievement over how much time is spent in the office.

Edmunds doesn’t prescribe the number of vacation days an employee can take, again communicating that it trusts and respects employees’ abilities to get their work done.

The bottom line for building an environment of respect, Epstein said, "is to believe that your employees have the best intentions and that they want to do great work."


"Managers think the job of a leader is to talk to people, but it’s really to listen. Listen to their goals and objectives," Gibbard said "Give them some feeling of value in their work. Judge people based on their strengths. Don’t rely on punishment as a means of motivating. Give people the space to set their boundaries, and don’t cross them."

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