

Give employees appropriate strokes

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Zubin was assigned the task of creating a PowerPoint presentation by his manager Rajan. Rajan, a kind person by nature, was unwilling to see failures in persons, particularly in his juniors, and did not confront them in a way that could assist them in recognising the flaws sometimes in their work. Worrying that he might become unpopular, he would gloss over details even if not correct.

Zubin, knowing this tendency in Rajan to avoid commenting even if not up to expectation, submitted his assignment incomplete as he wished to leave work early. He thought if Rajan was unhappy he would alter the PowerPoint later.

Rajan received the PowerPoint by email and even before examining it properly shot off a message to Zubin congratulating him on completing the task. Zubin was aware that there may be aspects that could be improved but decided he had put in his best.



When Rajan presented the PowerPoint to his superiors, several of them commented on it being shoddy.

Rajan was upset yet again and not wanting to compromise his image of being seen as a generous boss by Zubin, fed Zubin with part of the truth telling him that he, Zubin, was intelligent and it was Rajan's superiors who were being harsh and critical.

Zubin took this as a positive stroke and encouragement and continued to perform sub-optimally until one day he was assigned to another superior who

unlike Rajan faulted him constantly forcing Zubin to resign and leave.

Zubin always remembered Rajan for his kindness and the constant positive strokes he had received from him, yet many years later when he encountered Ramesh, his superior in a new organisation he joined, he realised how Rajan instead of helping him grow had actually stunted him.

Ramesh had assigned Zubin a task which Zubin completed but with several gaps. Ramesh called Zubin to his cabin and began by first asking Zubin about his understanding of the task given to him. He did not immediately point out the flaws he had noticed in Zubin's effort but questioned him on how he had gone about it.

Slowly, through enquiry, he helped Zubin recognise the pitfalls in what he had submitted and while not devaluing Zubin or his effort, suggested he rework the exercise mindful of what they had discussed.

Zubin left Ramesh's cabin feeling listened to and though perhaps dissatisfied that his effort had not been completely embraced, was willing to examine what he had done.

After a couple of iterations Ramesh congratulated Zubin on his hard work and appreciated his openness to re-examine his work and make necessary changes thus turning in a sensible document.

Zubin through such encouragement from Ramesh rose rapidly in the organisation and in time occupied Ramesh's position when Ramesh was promoted.

Reflecting on his growth as a manager, many years later, with a group on new entrants, he explored with them the effect of strokes employees were given.

While positive strokes play a significant part in employee development they must be given with fairness, honesty and appropriateness.

What does it mean to be fair, honest and appropriate?

Fairness means being:

- a) Non-judgmental
- b) Specific
- c) Descriptive
- d) Recognisable
- e) Enabling
- f) Relevant
- g) Objective
- h) Timely.

Honest means:

- a) Direct
- b) Authentic
- c) Truthful
- d) Unbiased
- e) Serious
- f) Well meaning.

Appropriate means:

- a) Contextual
- b) Identifiable
- c) Sensitive
- d) Adequate.

Praise, in a study conducted some years ago in the USA among school students, proved that it can sometimes be limiting than extending.

In a painting class for 4th graders a teacher had asked them to create and paint a landscape. Two other teachers were assigned the task of supervising the students.

The teachers divided the children among themselves with one teacher being responsible to assess one set of children and another, the second set. One teacher who was concerned about being liked by the children commented positively on everything that was shown to her telling the children they were smart and intelligent.

The second teacher examined each painting and helped the children see how he or she could make it more alive.

When the same set of children sat later in the semester to take a painting examination, it was noticed that the children who had received 'unqualified' praise turned out average effort and in fact felt very anxious, rapidly finishing the task and submitting their contribution while the group of students who had been carefully instructed by their teacher took longer and did a more thorough job.

While grading the students the examiner asked a few children who had quickly submitted their assignment how they were feeling? Many of them said they had felt anxious while executing the task as they were aware, having been told they were clever, that they had to turn in good and clever stuff. They were anxious that if they did not do a good job they would be considered less intelligent than they had been called.

If strokes are provided appropriately it also tells the recipients that the purveyor is actually interested in them, considers them significant and is willing to invest in them.

Employees, why even ordinary persons, if so treated with appropriate strokes will in time come to self-value and learn to live less of a lie. They will be able to introspect, confront self, learn to appreciate what is functional and beneficial in their effort, what works and what does not and how and why to better their efforts. In so being they are grounded, less given to flights of fancy and genuinely satisfied with their efforts.

Those who yield to praise that is not founded on recognisable data, and refuse to also appreciate growth edges in themselves tend to be nonchalant about what they do, tend to put in only the required effort and do not push the boundaries of possibilities. Thus they thrive on status quo and deny themselves of becoming what they can become, 'rise like a phoenix.'

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