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A bad example

By Paperitalo Staff

A couple of weeks ago, a faithful reader suggested I write a column about some senior executives in our industry taking big bonuses while their company prepared to file for bankruptcy. Sound familiar? It should, this is not a phenomenon for which only our industry has a monopoly.

Here at Nip Impressions, I tend to take a populist's view, looking out for the people in the trenches. Sometimes you write thinking I am not doing so, but in reality, in most of those cases, the writer is in denial about what is really happening. I'll feed you the good and the bad, all the while thinking about the effects on you and your family.

In this current scenario in paragraph one above, I don't know that I can offer much constructive action beyond sympathy. Powerful bad players are always going to be powerful bad players, and those below can have little influence on their actions. However, turn the situation around for a minute. At what price would you accept the accountability for operating a USD 1 + billion company? It would take a lot to get me to take on such responsibility.

I am in an organization where my "boss" doesn't know much about being a "boss." Since I volunteered for this, I can get out any time I want. However, I choose to accept the challenge of training my boss from a position of little influence. This, however, is somewhat different than a real job, and particularly a real job where the bad players are several levels above you and probably do not even know who you are. Your only choice in such a situation, if you feel strongly enough about it, is to leave, an often costly decision (in current terms, in a long term scenario, it is probably the thing you should do).

However, the writer went on to express that as a management professional, the hourly workers, especially in a union mill, tend to lump all managers together, the good with the higher up bad bosses, as all being bad apples. This you can work on, carefully.

The careful part is this. Keep up a good dialogue with your direct reports and all who work for you, hourly or salaried. At the same time, keep it professional, don't get so close your direct reports think they can call on you to look the other way while they commit some infraction, real or implied. They need to know you are a regular person that will communicate all you can but maintain high standards.

There are many false rumors and legends that are spread around in almost any working environment. In my experience, most of these crazy conversations take place during breaks and lunchtime. These are good times for managers to mingle and make themselves available to their underlings. In the military they frown on fraternization among the ranks, even eating together, but on the front lines in a manufacturing operation, I think closer is better.

A couple of examples. People not involved in the business end of a mill often spread the foolish rumor that it is OK for a mill to operate at a loss, because the big corporation needs tax write-offs anyway. This is about as stupid a statement as can be uttered. No one needs tax write-offs, and if an organization has them for too long, they will go out of business (or close the unit that is causing the write-offs).

Another example, a favorite among maintenance crafts persons, is "they give us junk tools to work with." I have seen this uttered in mills that had the latest and greatest state-of-the art tools and diagnostic equipment.

The most tragic I ever heard, though, was the mill where everyone sat around at lunch and moaned about their wages. After some time of doing this, a single mother, without checking out the real facts, quit her job and showed up at the state unemployment office saying, "I need a job that pays better than the one I had at -----." An acquaintance of mine who worked in the unemployment office and told me this story said he told her, as gently as he could, that she had just quit the best employer in the entire county. And they had a policy of never taking back voluntary quits, no matter what.

So, we can do little, if anything, about bad apples at the top, but we can certainly help clear up communications for everyone who works for us. Suggest you be about this activity as a daily routine.

False rumors can abound in safety as well. Solicit them in safety meetings and put them to rest.

Be safe and we will talk next week. ##