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What are you afraid of?

By Paperitalo Staff

Over the years, it has been interesting to watch the fear level of employees. In those tending to be fearful, it has often seemed their fear level at work was really related to matters outside of work. The young, unencumbered by family obligations or debt, seem to be fairly carefree. As children come along and become involved in school, the desire to maintain a stable household becomes a driving force. Later, paying for college may drive one's fear. Finally, closing in on retirement, fear seems to subside to the early career levels once again.

So, one way or another, fear seems to be related to keeping the paychecks coming. Of course, a heavy component in this is your confidence and awareness of your surroundings.

I once worked for a company where the CEO was a real SOB. After I left, which was not related to him, even though I had had a great deal of exposure to him, I was talking to one of his direct reports. The subject of the CEO's style came up and I expressed my opinion. My friend laughed and commented, "Have you ever heard or witnessed him (the CEO) firing anyone?" My answer was no. Then he went on, "I'll grant you, many people were fearful and ran away, but he never fired anyone. And after I figured that out, I never worried about him again."

Good point.

For some of us, our fears relate to something else, perhaps childhood, perhaps our performance in school. I had a psychologist tell me one time that many of us are afraid of being "found out"—to be a fool, ignorant, cheat, you name it. And none of this may be true. It could be it is all things we have conjured up in our heads.

As a manager, an important thing to figure out is that fearful employees do funny (not "ha, ha") things you don't want them to do. Again, as a manager, you can't always control all of this (because some of it may be related to matters long past), but there are portions you can.

For instance, if an employee (this works with your kids, too) brings you bad news, a violent reaction on your part is the first step toward training them to not bring you bad news again. I was able to manage this well with the kids—bad news was seldom met with more than a raised eyebrow at the time of disclosure—because I wanted them to bring me the real bad news when it happened.

If you are always reacting violently to bad news as a manager, I can promise you your subordinates are not telling you everything that is going on—and someday that could provoke a real disaster.

But I'll wrap up by going back to employees. I went to work as a senior manager in a facility one time. A very competent employee had a bad case of being afraid. In fact, it was so bad he had the mannerisms of an abused dog. His body language was very pronounced and very defensive. I tried to help him to no avail. After I left, I heard, sometime later he did, too, and the last I heard he had succeeded nicely elsewhere.

Don't walk around in fear. Life is too short. If you spend your days dreading work because you are afraid, get some professional help if you cannot cope with it yourself. This does not have to be a permanent condition.

For safety this week, fear can affect your safety attitude in a very negative way. Preoccupation with any emotional baggage like fear can make you less safe.

Be safe and we will talk next week. ##