

# 19 Key People Skills Leaders Need at Every Level



LEADERSHIP & STRATEGY



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# 19 Key People Skills Leaders Need at Every Level

Most leaders and employees go to school to learn their trade. Or they gain valuable experience from on-the-job training. And if they worked in a vacuum, that would be enough to get the job done.

But no one works under those circumstances these days. Managers rely on employees. Employees turn to co-workers for help. Departments must interact. Companies need to work with other businesses. All of that daily interaction requires strong people skills – also referred to as communication, soft skills or interpersonal skills. They're so important that 96% of executives rated these people skills as the most valuable employee trait in a University of Phoenix study.

And very few companies take time to sharpen the skills that make it easier for people to get along and for managers to lead.

To improve the essential people skills, it's important to know what they are and how they impact employees, co-workers and the workplace. Then leaders can apply proven practices to become better communicators and people managers.

## People skills 1: Listening

*We have two ears and one mouth so we may listen more and talk less.*

*– Epictetus*

Ironically, good communication depends more on a person's ability to listen than on his or her ability to speak. When leaders listen well, they absorb issues, understand feelings, foresee potential problems and solutions, and eventually communicate the right decisions in the right tone.

Any leader can hear and parrot back information. Good leaders listen so they can process the information.

Follow these tips to better listening:

- **Keep yourself clear.** When employees, colleagues, clients or customers need their managers, it's important to give them undivided attention by talking privately at an arranged time with no distractions (e-mail, phones, paperwork).

Tip: When employees ask their managers, "Do you have a minute?" If they don't have time they can respond, "I only have a minute right now. If you need more time, I'd be happy to arrange a meeting later today."

- **Take notes.** This helps leaders remember what's been said and keeps track of the most important facts and emotions. Taking notes also shows people you care and are listening wholeheartedly.
- **Hold your tongue.** Avoid interrupting speakers, especially in one-on-one conversations. Let others get through the facts and emotions. Often, just spilling their guts is enough to make them feel better – and you're a hero for listening and not saying a word!
- **Get focused.** If managers have an important task to accomplish, they should make a note of it before they start a conversation with someone. That way, they can stop thinking about the call to make, e-mail to send, report to finish, etc., and focus on the conversation at hand.
- **Hold judgment.** Put aside unrelated personal feelings about people and their circumstances when listening to them. Instead, focus on the facts and acknowledge emotions.
- **Be open to opinions.** Leaders sometimes don't agree with what employees, co-workers, clients and customers say – and stop listening because they're focusing on their rebuttal.

Instead, they should continue to listen and note their points when it's their turn to talk.

- **Respond, don't react.** Finally, when you're done listening and ready to talk, focus on giving a response rather than a reaction. What's the difference?
  - **A response** is a balance of thought and emotion, and often includes a question so you can better understand.
  - **A reaction** is mostly an emotional action that lacks thought and understanding of what the other person said.

## People skills 2: Communicating

*Communication is about being effective, not always about being proper.*

*– Bo Bennett*

Communicating well is the cornerstone of good relationships.

Whether leaders are talking to employees or colleagues, writing e-mails, training or speaking in front of a group, these communication essentials will help:

- **Create a commonality.** Once leaders know their colleagues and employees, they can share information about themselves that they have in common (for instance, a hobby, past experience in work or life, an interest in events or sports, etc.). It makes them more approachable.
- **Be courteous.** People will listen, and things will get done if managers communicate with courtesy. For example, "Can you please ...?" "I need you to do ... Will you be able to?" "Please take care of ..."
- **Be consistent.** Match your tone of voice with your words.
- **Clarify.** When the topic is important (not just casual), it's vital for managers to make sure they're understood. For example,

## Do you send negative micromessages?

Do you send negative micromessages to your employees? If you check e-mail, shuffle papers or look at your watch when talking to them, the answer's yes. If you forget names, and use "I'm terrible with names" as an excuse, the answer's yes.

Those subtle, negative micromessages suggest you don't care about the person in front of you.

Instead, send these positive micromessages:

- Give others full attention when they talk, and
- Give equal time to all of your employees.

they could ask "What questions do you have about this report?"

- **Show confidence.** Back up statements with facts. Leaders should try to avoid tentative language such as "might," "maybe," "possibly" and "ASAP."

## People skills 3: Nonverbal communication

*When deeds speak, words are nothing.*

*- African Proverb*

In most cases, actions speak louder than words. If a manager says,

"I like your work," and rolls his or her eyes, the words aren't believable.

In fact, research has found:

- The words we choose have a 7% impact on what's interpreted,
- Tone of voice has a 38% impact, and
- Body language has a 55% impact.

That's why it's important for leaders to make sure their body language complements what they say. They can do this by keeping these non-verbal communication cues in mind:

- **Eye contact.** Looking directly at people when speaking shows respect and sincerity. It builds a better conversation and relationship. On the flip side, leaders who avoid eye contact appear to be sneaky, guilty, bashful or frightened. Caveat: Avoid staring or blinking rapidly. Instead, look away from time to time to appear relaxed and comfortable.

*Tip:* If maintaining eye contact is uncomfortable, focus on the bridge of the listener's nose. This gives the appearance

of looking someone in the eye.

- **Body position.** Conversing while standing or sitting side-by-side can make people feel disconnected, and when done face-to-face can be uncomfortable. Ideally, it's best to keep the same eye level and remain at a slight angle from others. In addition, maintaining good posture shows confidence so others will pay attention.
- **Proper distance.** Being too close or too far from others during a conversation can make it less productive. Stay within arm's reach. Also, pay attention to people's body language. If they seem uncomfortable, give them a little more space.
- **Gestures.** Motion can add meaning to or detract from messages. Remember:
  - Crossed arms signal anger or lack of openness to ideas.
  - Playing with clothing, jewelry, pencils, etc., distracts listeners.
  - Large gestures also distract the audience.
- **Facial expressions.** A person's face speaks the loudest in non-verbal communication. Forced smiles show insincerity. A wrinkled forehead shows tension. Pursed lips suggest anger. Rolling eyes or head tilts indicate disapproval. Managers need to make sure the facial expressions they use are in line with the message they want to deliver.

## People skills 4: Delivering bad news

*Nothing travels faster than light, with the possible exception of bad news, which follows its own rules.*

*– Douglas Adams*

Only one thing can be worse than hearing bad news: delivering it.

Nearly every leader has to deliver bad news at one time or another. Doing it with finesse will help managers go down in company

history as a well-liked professional.

Here's how to deliver bad news so it's a little easier on the people affected by it:

## Responding to emotional times

When managers deliver bad or good news – or something extraordinary happens in the workplace – emotions run high.

In emotional times, it's best for managers to avoid agreeing or disagreeing with people's reactions. Instead, they should let their employees know they're aware of how they feel. Some statements to try:

- "I can tell you feel strongly about this."
- "You are obviously happy about this."
- "I know you're upset."

- **Make it fast.** Delivering the news as quickly as possible gives people a chance to plan their next move. One caveat: Avoid delivering bad news on a Friday (or whatever is the end of the work week) so it doesn't fester with people for days and they come back to work upset or resentful.
- **Visit or call.** Deliver bad news personally. When leaders do this, it shows they care about how the news will affect their people. Delivering bad news via e-mail or a memo suggests leaders are distancing themselves from the people and situation.
- **Be as honest as possible.** Managers don't have to reveal every detail (because some are personnel- or financial-related). Plus, people don't have time for all the details. But to maintain credibility, leaders want to avoid covering up mistakes, forgetfulness or miscommunications that led to decisions and bad news.
- **Take responsibility.** Leaders don't want to blame themselves, their bosses or the company if they aren't to blame. Then again, don't blame "the economy" for everything, either. Acknowledge your part in the situation without being defensive.
- **Respond.** Give employees, co-workers, clients or customers a chance to discuss how the bad news affects them. Acknowledge their feelings, and offer suggestions on how to deal with the situation.

## People skills 5: Saying no

*The art of leadership is saying no, not saying yes. It is very easy to say yes.*

*– Tony Blair*

You'd think to be a people person, leaders would have to be a "yes man/woman." Wrong.

Leaders have to say no to people and ideas, or they'd never get anything done. However, it's best to give a no answer in a way that doesn't make the person with the request feel rejected.

Here's how:

- **Empathize.** When leaders and managers can't do what people want or can't give employees permission to do something, they need to let them know they understand the situation.
- **Clarify.** Leaders should explain why they have to deny the request.
- **Offer something.** It's best for leaders to end the denial on a positive note by telling people how they're willing to help.

Examples:

*"I see you need some help, but your request is outside normal procedures. Have you considered ... ?"*

*"I can tell this is important to you. It's a unique situation. I can help you by ... "*

*"I'd like to do that, but it's beyond what's possible for us. Please let me help you in another way."*

## People skills 6: Negotiating

*If you can't go around it, over it or through it, you had better negotiate with it.*

*– Ashleigh Brilliant*

Most leaders negotiate from the moment they get up in the morning, through the workday and well into the evening – whether it's with family, friends or co-workers. No matter the situation, the most successful negotiators develop long-term relationships and help themselves and others succeed in the end.

Leaders who strive to get what they want, but be fair and keep others happy, follow these negotiating tactics:

- **Balance participation.** All people want to be involved in decisions that affect them. Once managers offer their thoughts and positions, it's a good idea to ask for the other person's thoughts on the subject. Most importantly, managers should consider how the benefits and drawbacks affect others before they meet. Managers who see the situation through their employees' eyes often find reasonable solutions faster.
- **Understand the other side.** Before moving on to the final decisions and solutions, it's important for managers to show they've heard and understand what others have said and feel. Some key phrases:
  - "I understand that you want ... "
  - "I sense that you feel this way about the situation ... "
  - "You seem to want ... Do I have that right?"
  - "Your position is ... Would you agree with my assessment?"
- **Be prepared to offer several options.** It's a good idea for leaders to come to the meeting knowing their highest priorities and what they'd be willing to give up to make negotiations work. They should also encourage others to do the same. Once both sides understand one another's positions, leaders can offer several potential solutions.
- **Offer help.** Negotiations are often a give and take, by both sides. But employees don't always see negotiations that way.

In their eyes, they're losing something. Leaders can ease that burden by offering to help out in some small way, making it clear they're a team player.

- **Make others look good.** Compliment others on what they achieved in the talks and the work they've accomplished. Help them sell the final decision to others who will be affected. Arm them with written documentation (agreements, notes of thanks, completed reports, etc.) so they can show others what was done and have proof of their success.

## People skills 7: Connecting with employees and colleagues

*Learn fast, fail fast, correct fast and connect fast.*

*– Linda Chandler*

Leaders and managers don't have to be friends with their employees or colleagues – but they have to be friendly. Since they spend the bulk of each work day dealing with colleagues and employees, it only makes sense to have cordial relationships. It makes working with them more productive and cohesive.

To improve interactions and create a deeper connection with employees and colleagues:

- **Make it personal.** Use people's names when talking to them – from the janitor to the CEO. Even better, use the names of their significant others – spouses, kids, parents – when possible.
- **Say more than hello.** Sometimes it's necessary to cut to the chase and get to the business at hand – a project, deadline, important question, etc. But in other circumstances, there's time to show interest in employees' and colleagues' lives. Instead of a generic "How are you?" ask about something that affects them.
- **Talk about their interests.** People surround themselves with

## Build employee trust and loyalty

Leaders can build deeper trust and cement the loyalty of their employees by periodically asking questions that show they care about their on-the-job well-being.

Try these two questions:

1. What is the biggest obstacle you face in getting your job done?
2. What can I do to make your job easier?

hints of what interests them outside of work (for instance, sports ticket stubs, photos of beach trips, logo T-shirts from local events, race medals, certificates of appreciation from philanthropic groups, etc.). Look for those hints and ask about them. Once you know a little about what they do outside work, you have a starter for other conversations: “How did your son’s soccer game turn out?” “Where did you volunteer this weekend?” “Planning any vacations?”

- **Show appreciation.** Avoid waiting for the end of a project or annual reviews to thank employees and co-workers for their contributions. And it’s OK to say thanks for the little things they bring to the table – a good sense of humor, a sharp eye for errors, an impeccable work station, a positive attitude.
- **Make others feel important.** Feeling important is slightly different than feeling appreciated. Employees need to know they’re relevant. Let them know you recognize their contributions by referring to past successes when you talk to them personally and to others in meetings. Explain why their work was important.
- **Recognize emotions.** Work and life are roller coasters of emotions. Leaders don’t have to react to every peak and valley, but they’ll want to address the highs and lows they see. For instance, “You seem frustrated and anxious lately. Is something wrong that I can help with?” Or, “I can sense you’re very excited and proud. You deserve to be.”

## People skills 8: Giving criticism

*Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfills the same function as pain in the human body. It calls attention to an unhealthy state of things.*

– Winston Churchill

Unfortunately, employees don't always do things that make their managers proud or perform at a level that deserves thanks and recognition. Then managers have to criticize employees' work or behavior. While this is a task no manager looks forward to, it can be done with finesse and without making employees resentful.

## Avoid these missteps when criticizing

When managers criticize, they often say things they don't intend because they don't want to be mean.

While it's OK to soften the blow, here are two things that should never be said:

- **"I have no choice but to ..."** You likely have options, and the employee will point them out.
- **"This is as hard on me as it is on you."** Employees are more interested that you care about *their* emotions.

Here are seven keys for delivering criticism with finesse:

1. **Go behind closed doors.** Follow the old rule "Praise in public, criticize in private."
2. **Avoid finger pointing.** When phrases like "You should have ... " or "Why didn't you ... ?" are used, people quickly become defensive. Instead, try one of these:
  - "I've noticed that you ... "
  - "I don't know if you've noticed that you ... "
3. **Avoid sugarcoating.** Many leaders don't want to hurt other people's feelings, so they "sandwich" criticism between two compliments. Avoid this because some people will filter out the criticism and focus on the praise. Instead go right to the issue, mention past successes and ask where the problem is.

*Example:* "Joan, this report is incomplete. You're usually very thorough. Can you tell me what's happened here?"
4. **Criticize one thing at a time.** Criticizing several things at one time will lighten the importance of each item. Plus, it'll make people feel as if they're failing at everything – not just one or two things.
5. **Be specific about the change that's needed.** Often what leaders want fixed, stopped or changed is obvious to them, but may not be so obvious to the person who needs to do it. So it's vital to be specific on what needs to change. For example, instead of "From now on, I need it ASAP," say "Starting this week, I want it by 9 a.m. Friday." Or instead of "You need to eliminate more

errors,” say “You’ll have to drop the error rate by 50%.”

6. **Criticize right before there’s a chance to try again.** This makes the feedback seem supportive, not critical. While it isn’t always practical to hold off on criticism, this approach allows managers to help employees make adjustments that will last longer.
7. **Involve the other person.** Even when managers have specific changes in mind that need to be made, employees are more likely to embrace the changes when they’re part of the solution. Consider saying:
  - “Do you have any ideas on how to make sure you ... ”
  - “What can I do to help you ... ?”
  - “I have some suggestions on how you can do this, but let me hear your ideas first.”

## People skills 9: Dealing with difficult employees

*Knowing your own darkness is the best method for dealing with the darkneses of other people.*

*– Carl Gustav Jung*

Every leader will have to deal with difficult employees. What makes it even tougher is the fact that other employees will watch how leaders deal with these people and judge them based on how they handled the situation.

Here’s a plan for how to deal with difficult employees:

1. **Tackle the problem.** The longer managers wait to deal with difficult situations, the faster they lose credibility with other employees and colleagues. Meet it head-on.
2. **Intervene.** If possible, pull difficult employees aside while they’re behaving badly (whether it’s with you or fellow workers). Many difficult employees don’t realize they’re a problem, so stopping them in the act can help them see the issues more clearly.

3. **Rely on facts.** Once managers point out the unacceptable behavior, they need to back it up with more documented information. For instance: “You punched in late just now. I have three time cards showing you’ve done it at least once every week this month. On all occasions, other employees have had to cover for you, and that’s not fair.”
4. **Plan it.** Ask difficult employees how they can fix the behavior or solve the issue. If they have no ideas, tell them what needs to be done. Then document the agreed-upon plan, set a time frame for improved behavior and have them sign an agreement to do it.
5. **Follow up.** When an issue is not addressed, the difficult behavior will continue. Check in daily until you’re sure a permanent change has been made.

## People skills 10: Maintaining professionalism

*A professional is someone who can do his best work when he doesn't feel like it.*

*– Alistair Cooke*

It's tough to be the boss at work and buddies outside of work – especially if you're a manager who was promoted from the ranks. So somewhere between being friendly and being friends with employees is the balance a leader wants.

To do so, follow these four guidelines on maintaining professional relationships with employees:

1. **Set parameters with close friends.** Leaders should let their friends within the company know they won't receive any special treatment or favors, and they want to be treated like any other boss.
2. **Be fair to all subordinates.** Sometimes the best candidate for a task (or promotion) is a friend, but some leaders might shy away from giving it to him or her because they think others will assume the friendship was the reason. Bottom

line: If a friend is the most qualified, give that person the job. If the friend is equally as qualified as another employee, and bias on the part of the leader is feared, ask another respected leader in the company to make the final decision.

3. **Watch what you say.** Friends share many personal confidences. But managers don't want to divulge any confidential work information to friends who are also employed by the same company. To decide whether or not to tell something to a friend, use this as your guide: If you question whether it's OK to share, it's not.
4. **Rely on friendships outside of work.** You don't have to disown workplace friendships, but if you want to bounce ideas off friends or need a sounding board for work issues, turn to a friend who doesn't have a personal interest in the company.

## People skills 11: Managing change

*Change is hard because people overestimate the value of what they have – and underestimate the value of what they may gain by giving that up.*

*– James Belasco and Ralph Stayer*

Change can rattle nerves or ease worries, cause tension or delight, and make groups better or worse. That makes change one of the most ideal situations for leaders to rely on their soft skills.

Try these four ways to lead employees through change and get them to buy in:

- **Get their input.** If you can't include everyone in the planning process of the change, ask those who are informal leaders with positive attitudes to participate. They can get others on board with their enthusiasm.
- **Hear their voices.** Give employees several opportunities to share their feelings about the changes – before, during and after. For example, keep an open-door policy, ask employees

to share ideas with a trusted co-worker who will report on what he or she hears, host formal or informal meetings to discuss the changes, etc.

- **Focus on the positive.** Outline specific ways the changes will improve work, processes, operations, etc. But be realistic, too. Point out where employees may run into obstacles.
- **Answer questions.** Remain available to answer questions until changes are so ingrained that they don't feel new anymore. If leaders are available to help, changes won't feel overwhelming to employees.

## People skills 12: Handling resistance

*It is the first responsibility of every citizen to question authority.*

*– Benjamin Franklin*

No matter how good managers are, they still have to deal with employees who find fault with nearly everything. Their resistance at every corner is enough to make the best leaders lose their cool – and forget their people skills.

To handle resistance with eloquence, follow these steps:

1. **Stop the conversation.** When it's obvious someone isn't going to agree, say "Let's stop here. I feel like we're stuck and need some time away from this subject."
2. **Recap the original goal.** When it's time to broach the topic again, start with a recap: "I wanted to tell you about the new circumstances we will all face and to gain your help in handling it."
3. **Describe what happened.** Try to move beyond the last conversation. For instance, "When we last talked, you were confrontational, making it hard for us to focus on the issue. Let's try to keep that from happening again."
4. **'Fess up.** Leaders should admit how they contributed to the issue. Example: "I became defensive when you questioned my decisions."

5. **Call it as you see it.** Let people know what you think has caused their resistance. You might say, “It seems you’re worried this means you’ll have more work to do, and that naturally makes you angry.”
6. **Recruit help.** Get resisters’ help in coming to a resolution. Try this: “I want us to figure out how to make the best of this” or “I have some ideas on what we could try, but I want to know where you think we should go from here.”

### People skills 13: Dealing with complaints

*If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude. Don't complain.*

*– Maya Angelou*

No matter what leaders are in charge of – from a food prep line to a Fortune 500 company – they’ll get complaints from employees. How they deal with them says a lot about their leadership skills.

Here are three ways to deal with complaints tactfully and effectively:

- **Challenge complainers.** When employees or colleagues mention an issue they want you to solve, ask “What do you hope the outcome of this will be?” When they answer, ask “Do you think the outcome you want is likely under the current circumstances?” and “What can you do to make this happen?” Asking these questions will turn complainers into problem solvers.
- **Establish a rule.** Some companies make it a rule: You can’t complain unless you offer a solution. That sets the tone for only constructive criticism in the workplace.
- **Don’t complain.** Set the example. When leaders mention a problem or issue to colleagues or employees, they should follow up with either a suggestion to a solution or a request for help in devising one.

## People skills 14: Practicing good manners

*Manners are a sensitive awareness of the feelings of others. If you have that awareness, you have good manners, no matter which fork you use.*

*– Emily Post*

Mother was right: Say please and thank you. Don't talk with food in your mouth. Don't interrupt.

Good manners are vital to good relationships. And that goes for the work environment, too – if leaders use good manners, employees will, too. With that in mind, keep these office manners in check:

- Get up, walk over and talk to employees or colleagues who are just a few feet away, rather than send an e-mail.
- Pick up the receiver when listening to voice mail messages. Don't use the speaker phone.
- When there's a computer problem, call IT rather than yell at the computer.
- Make coffee if it's the last cup, and refill whatever you finish (sugar, creamer, etc.).
- Respect people's time. Be early for meetings and limit them to the designated time.

Here's more incentive for practicing good manners at work: 65% of workers say they'd likely gossip about people who make loud personal calls, and 40% wouldn't cover for the person who didn't brew a new pot of coffee, one study found.

## People skills 15: Arguing with class

*Fear not those who argue, but those who dodge.*

*– Dale Carnegie*

Soft skills aren't just about being nice. Leaders face disagreements with employees and colleagues on a regular basis. Being fair and tactful in these situations is the sign of a skilled leader.

Here are six keys to arguing well with others:

## Keeping the peace

Managers with strong communication skills can recognize when an argument isn't worth the disruption in workplace civility.

When you want to keep the peace rather than pound through an unnecessary argument:

1. **Stop talking.** If there's nothing to be gained or accomplished by "being right," let it go.
2. **Say the right thing.** Tell employees and colleagues "You're right" when they are. That can immediately restore goodwill.

1. **Find middle ground.** Diplomatic leaders find one thing to agree on, such as a statement of fact – a date, place or time that something occurred or a physical attribute. Saying something like, "We agree that ..." sets the stage for more agreement.
2. **Be polite.** Leaders don't have to be friends with their employees, but they do have to be cordial. And when leaders are polite during a disagreement, others will likely mirror their behavior.
3. **Stay cool.** One key to this is keeping a calm and steady voice. Becoming louder won't resolve issues or settle arguments faster. To make a point, repeat it using different language. For instance: "If we want to meet the deadline, we have to put in the extra hours now, rather than later." Or "The best option is to work extra hours now, not next week."
4. **Assess yourself.** Most leaders know what pushes other peoples' buttons. The key to being a great leader is avoiding the temptation to push those buttons during a conflict, and, therefore, steer clear of further tension.
5. **Don't take the bait.** On the flip side, employees or colleagues also try to push their leaders' buttons during conflict. The best thing to do is ignore them or call them on it. For instance, "It's difficult to find a solution to our issue when you question my authority in this situation. I'd appreciate it if you'd please stop."
6. **Move forward.** Often no one sees his or her faults until others point them out – and they're still unlikely to own up to them. So forget asking others to apologize for poor behavior. Speak your piece and leave it at that. Then focus on what can be done to fix the problem at hand.

## People skills 16: Delegating

*Delegating work works, provided the one delegating works, too.*

*– Robert Half*

Leaders have to delegate work all the time. So it should be an easy task – “Do this for me, please ...” – but it’s not. Delegating takes some finesse so people embrace the work and it gets done effectively.

Four keys to better delegating are:

1. **Explain who will be in charge.** Even if employees are given the freedom to decide how the work will be done, make it clear who will be in charge of the results.
2. **Make the goal clear.** Give specifics of what the expected results are. Have employees repeat it so it’s clear they understand.
3. **Lay out challenges.** This is very important to success. It shows leaders understand employees will face obstacles and gives them a chance to help and encourage staff before the work even starts.
4. **Offer resources.** Let employees know what’s available to them – money, time, authority, equipment, etc. – and how they can get quick access to them.

## People skills 17: Building morale

*The best morale exists when you never hear the word mentioned.*

*When you hear a lot of talk about it, it’s usually lousy.*

*– Dwight Eisenhower*

If you have employees, you’ll have morale problems. No matter how thorough a company’s hiring process is, at some point leaders will have to handle morale issues because employees get stressed, are overworked and deal with difficult people.

The good news: Most of the time, employees won’t be down if their

managers build and maintain morale. To stay ahead of morale issues:

- **Communicate.** Employees left in the dark will become fearful and anxious and likely make up negative news to fill the gap. This can be avoided by regularly reporting information, changes and company news.
- **Listen.** While sharing information is a must, employees must also be heard. Give them different options to share their concerns and ideas. Offer the floor at department meetings, have regular one-on-one meetings, put up a suggestion box or anonymous e-mail account for submissions, invite executives to come in and listen, etc.
- **Appreciate.** People who aren't recognized for their contributions may assume they're not doing well. Leaders should take the time to thank employees for their everyday efforts that keep the operations running smoothly. In addition, extra effort should be recognized and rewarded.
- **Be fair.** Nothing hurts morale like unfair treatment. Leaders can't turn their backs on poor performances, and they can't play favorites. It's best to document what's done in response to good and bad behaviors so leaders can do the exact same thing when the situation arises again – and have a record of it.
- **Provide opportunities to grow.** Growth is often equated with moving up the career ladder. But it doesn't have to be. Many employees are motivated by learning and creating a larger role for themselves. So if people can't move up a career ladder (because there aren't positions available), encourage them to learn more about the company, industry or business through in-house or outside training. Or give them opportunities to grow socially by allowing them time to volunteer.
- **Create a friendly environment.** Research shows people who have friends at work are more motivated and loyal to

their employer. While this can't be forced, opportunities to build friendships can be provided through potluck lunches, team-building activities and requesting staff to help in the recruiting process.

- **Paint the picture.** Employees who know their purpose have higher morale than those who are "just doing the job." Regularly explain to employees how their roles fit into the company's mission and how they affect the department and the company.

## People skills 18: Recognizing good work

*There are two things people want more than sex and money ... recognition and praise.*

*- Mary Kay Ash*

Handing out recognition takes a little more skill than saying "Good job" and giving a pat on the back.

Giving recognition well is a skill all leaders need to keep their employees encouraged and productive.

Here are five guidelines for recognizing good work:

1. **Make it a policy, not a perk.** Set rules for different types of recognition. For instance, recognize people for tenure and meeting goals – things everyone can accomplish.
2. **Stay small.** Handshakes and sincere appreciation are always welcome (especially since 65% of employees say they haven't been recognized in the past year, according to a Gallup Poll). Leaders need to look their employees in the eye, thank them for specific work and explain why it made a difference.
3. **Add some fanfare.** Recognize people at meetings when others can congratulate them.
4. **Include the team.** In addition to praising individuals, recognize a whole group for coming through during an unexpected hard time, meeting a goal, working together, etc.

5. **Make it personal.** When recognizing employees, match the reward and praise to the person. One person may like a quiet thank-you and a gift card to a favorite store. Someone else might thrive on applause and a certificate given at a group lunch. Find out what people like and cater to them when possible.

## People skills 19: Nixing bad behaviors

*Act the way you'd like to be and soon you'll be the way you act.*

*– George W. Crane*

With all the skills and behaviors leaders want to keep in check, there are many that leaders want to drop – mostly because they make a poor impression on employees and colleagues, and detract from all the good soft skills.

Here are behaviors to nix before they become bad habits:

- Interrupting others
- Dominating conversations with employees, colleagues and/or customers
- Invading other people's personal space by standing too close to them when speaking one-on-one. (Leave about an arm's length.)
- Answering a cell phone or text message or letting the device ring loudly while meeting with others
- Chewing anything unless you're sharing a meal
- Showing up late for anything
- Sharing humor that is or could be interpreted as inappropriate
- Checking a watch or clock frequently
- Complaining incessantly, and
- Maintaining a messy workspace.

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