

Work First on Yourself

By Danny Cox

I could hardly wait to get back to the top office, because that's where I'd started out. That's where I'd been a brand new salesperson during the first year I was out of the Air Force. Just imagine how the top people in that office — who remembered me as the new guy from the year before, the rookie from right out of the Air Force — would welcome me back as their boss. You guessed it. They hated me with a passion.

I kept saying to them, "Don't think of me as the boss. Think of me as a friend who's always right." (Ever work for one of those bosses?) Right there you can see where I made my big mistake. I wanted an office full of people like myself.

Most managers try to turn people who work for them into copies for two reasons. First they think, "Isn't that what the company wants? You know—people running around saying the same things and doing the same things. So the company wants everybody to think alike, dress alike, talk alike, and therefore I must have the company's blessing to turn everybody into little versions of me. Otherwise they'd put somebody different in the manager's chair, right?"

But that's the smaller of the two common reasons. The bigger one is this: Managers say to themselves, "If I can get these people to do that job just like I used to do that job, they'll never bring me a problem that I haven't already survived. So I will never be embarrassed with an unsolvable problem, and I will continue to be promoted." Now, isn't that a wonderful plan? It made sense to me! Well, I didn't know it, but I might as well have been the captain on the Titanic, bellowing, "Don't bother me with any warnings about icebergs, thank you very much! I've got a job to do here!" That was the way I thought when they made me a top gun, and I think you can imagine how well it worked. I took that office from first place to 36th out of 36 offices, in just three months. If a competitor had planted a saboteur in that office, with orders to destroy any trace of productivity or profitability, I think it would have taken more than three months to get the job done as well as I did it.

I was in trouble. My boss came to my office to deliver a terse little message through tight lips. He said, "I certainly made a mistake making you the manager and I feel it's only fair to let you know I'm now looking for your replacement."

"Well," I said, "That has got to be the shortest and the finest motivational seminar I have ever attended. I'll have to do something to turn this situation around." "You don't have much time," he replied. I said, "You have no idea how motivated I am."

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So I went to work. But I went to work on me—not on the people who reported to me. Somerset Maugham once said, “Adversity puts iron in your flesh.” I went back to square one and started learning not only about my own potential, but the potential of the people who worked for me. And the biggest lesson I learned was that people can get better—right after their manager does.

There are universal applications in that principle. Kids get better right after parents do. Students get better right after teachers do. Audiences get better right after speakers do. Customers get better right after salespeople, sales managers and upper management get better. That’s a lesson we often learn the hard way, through adversity.

It turned out that I didn’t lose my job. I started studying and listening to the people who worked for me, and I stopped trying to turn them into reproductions of myself. I started encouraging a more creative approach to the problems we faced. That was a moment to be savored.

Nobody builds a self-imposed barrier for you. You build it for yourself. A self-imposed barrier is not a wall around your life, it’s just the margin of your life, where you stopped growing. These barriers can rise up at just about any level, whether it’s low, medium, or even high productivity!

ACTION: Are there personal changes you need to make before you can help those in your business improve?

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