

Adapting to the 'living with COVID' world

Alan Finch

August 2022

The following is based on the messages contained in an address to graduating students from the Universal Business School Sydney (UBSS) in August. Graduation addresses are, of necessity succinct and I have taken the opportunity to expand on the brief points which were made in the speech about managing and leading the people who work with you.

Successful degree completion is the product of persistent hard work, self-motivation and occasional sleep deprivation. These same elements are requirements for a successful career, irrespective of whether you are working on site, working from home – or for that matter *working from anywhere*.

Wherever you work and whatever your occupation, an understanding of the basic principles of maintaining good human relationships in a workplace context is an essential part of a successful career. To suggest that these skills will no longer be so important in an age of automation and ongoing digitisation of the workplace – is simply wrong!

We are in a vastly different space in the changed 'living with COVID' world. Adaptability and a mixture of on-line and interactive contact in an office are likely to be the future of our working world moving forward. Whether you work in services or sales, whether you are in marketing, IT, finance or management, the way in which you deal with people will still be important. I share the following suggestions about what I regard as practical advice for leading and managing people, drawn from my own experience.

Hiring

Appoint the brightest people that you can, but define the specific skills and experience which are necessary to perform the role and ensure that those selected for interview conform to those requirements. Also be aware of the potential "fit" of an individual within the organisation. Use a selection process which relies on the assessments of a small group whose judgement you trust and never be concerned about whether a bright or overqualified applicant might show you up or displace you. If they excel it reflects well upon you.

If you make a bad appointment, and it happens despite best intentions, fix it as soon as possible to minimise the negative impact on your team. Delaying action until contract expiry might avoid the unpleasantness of terminating someone, but the consequences of prevarication can be quite dysfunctional. Always include an appropriate probation period in your employment contracts, say 6 months, set KPI's or objectives to be achieved during that period and review the situation fully, clinically and objectively at that time. Always remember that you have to act in the interests of your organisation.

Managing and leading

There is often confusion about what constitutes leadership and what differentiates it from management. My own definition is that management is primarily supervision, that is doing your best to ensure that staff are performing their prescribed duties properly, functioning as they should, and working together. Leadership is developing staff to achieve their potential and ensuring that they are guided and supported to do so to the benefit of the organisation and in line with the strategic direction of the organisation. Management is about ensuring that work gets done; leadership is about motivating people. A good manager should be able to do both.

Retention and promotion expectations

Remember that bright people usually are ambitious. I have always taken the view that if opportunities for advancement do not exist in my organisation, I should be realistic about retention expectations. Three to five years of excellent service and contribution are preferable to a decade of solid but moderate performance. Support good people seeking advancement and let them know that they can depend upon your support if they wish to move on. They will be useful contacts for you as their careers advance.

Be careful to promote on the basis of demonstrated competence, performance and potential. Don't fall into the trap of the Peter Principle (promoting people beyond their level of competence).

Build trust and respect

Acknowledge achievement. If one of your people does something good, tell them so, preferably in front of their peers, and also acknowledge their contribution to your senior colleagues. Do not take credit for someone else's hard work or good idea, but acknowledge the source. Be a mentor to your people. Encourage and support them and facilitate opportunities for them to grow their experience and knowledge. Look for opportunities for them to learn from networking which will provide such opportunities.

Don't try to shift blame. We all make mistakes, be prepared to own yours. To do otherwise will cost you the respect of your staff.

Pick your battles, but do try to defend your staff against unfair criticism.

Do not micromanage people. Empower them by letting them do what they have been hired to do. Interfering and taking away responsibility can be demoralising, and some senior managers cannot help themselves. Understand that you are unlikely to have the same understanding of a function as the staff member who has that function as a prime responsibility, and that you are likely to diminish the respect that they have for you if you do not respect their knowledge of their role.

Above all else remember that you are dealing with other human beings. They have feelings, they need regular feedback and guidance, they need encouragement and they should be treated with respect.

Fostering Initiative

Encourage initiative, innovation and creativity. The best ideas often come from those at the coal face because they fully understand processes and usually know how they could be improved. Encourage staff to think about their roles and to share their thoughts about how to improve processes and make them more efficient. And don't be afraid to implement suggestions which make sense.

Communication - The importance of listening

Learn to know when you should speak and when you should let others do so. That is essential in creating effective communication. You need to show that you are willing to listen to inputs and prepared to encourage them. Listen, be civil, be patient and try to be fair and consistent in your responses.

Create opportunities for your managers to meet with you individually to facilitate their (and your) understanding of how they are progressing and collectively so that different functional areas can collaborate and work together more effectively. This will also encourage better communication between them in their day to day work environment and also develop respectful and productive relationship.

Always leave space in your diary to accommodate a meeting with a staff member who wants to see you.

Dispute Resolution

Things don't always go smoothly and when dealing with disagreements between your staff, always make sure that you obtain a balanced understanding of what the issues are before you make any decision or take any action. I have always found that by sitting down with the complainant and then with any other parties involved and patiently and calmly encouraging all parties to provide their perspective on a problem usually ends up providing a clearer view of what you are dealing with and how to best resolve it. Much better than jumping to the wrong conclusion.

Lead by Example

Continue to value the merit of working hard, stay focused on your objectives and lead by example. Show that you are prepared to put in extra time and effort when needed and that you are prepared to step in and help when that is needed.

Be at work no later than your staff and that you do not leave before them.

If you decide to go missing, or indulge in frequent long coffee breaks or lunches, then you cannot expect your staff to go the extra yards when required,

Stay calm

Above all else persevere and remain calm in times of adversity – irritation and anger are not good perspectives for dealing with problems. Suppress instinctive reactions and take a moment to consider problems objectively and then work on solutions with your team. If they think that you are going to explode every time that they make a mistake or bring a problem to you for your help, they will cease to do so.

You don't know everything

The motto on the coat of arms of the university where I spent most of my professional life was, "Forever Learning". Don't stop learning, and if you don't know or understand something, ask someone who might. No-one will think less of you for seeking information, but they will come to regard you as less than intelligent if you don't seek advice when you need to.

In conclusion, none of this advice is complex or difficult to practice. It is the way in which you can develop teamwork by demonstrating empathy, and an appropriate level of care for and interest in your staff. Ultimately this will result in a more cohesive and productive environment.

Alan Finch is an Adjunct Professor at UBSS and an independent Director on the GCA Board