



Busting the Myths that a Manager Must Be Consistent and Not Have Favorites

People are wrong when they say a manager must be consistent and not have favorites. Employees are not all the same: therefore they should not be treated the same.

By Mac McIntire

In this article I intend to wax philosophical on several management issues. My management philosophies have been forged over the 37 years I've worked as a management consultant. I have to warn you that some of my management philosophies are contrary to popularly held beliefs by many noted business gurus.

For instance, the moment I heard Abraham Maslow's theory that people have an ascending "hierarchy of needs," I disagreed completely. From personal experience I've witnessed many people who sacrifice their lower "survival" needs for things that are much higher on Maslow's hierarchy. Countless employees, for example, have been fired because they couldn't control their ego, thereby jeopardizing their security and safety needs. Many artists have sacrificed the security of steady employment for the artistic freedom of self-actualization. Other people choose socialization over work, again showing basic survival is not necessarily as basic as Maslow declared.

Another area where I disagree with the gurus is regarding the need to be continually learning. They encourage managers be up-to-date on the latest managerial practices. I, on the other hand, often try to get managers to stop reading so many management books. I do this for two reasons.

First, I've seen too many managers who have yet to master the basic fundamentals of management. I'd rather have these managers develop a foundation of the old, tried-and-true principles than have them charge off after some new management fad every time they read another management book.

The second reason why I discourage managers from reading too much is along the same line. Some managers have a tendency to jump from one management fad to the next rage every time they read another book. They never stay in one place long enough to master a technique or principle. They never get good because they're constantly trying to get better. They become the promoter of many management philosophies, and the practitioner of none.

In this article I wish to put to bed forever two prevalent management philosophies that I believe are damaging myths in the workplace. These two myths are: 1) that myth that managers must be

consistent, and 2) that myth that managers should not have favorites.

Myth #1: Managers Must Be Consistent

Perhaps the most prevalent contrary position I take regarding management is that I firmly believe managers should be *inconsistent* rather than *consistent* in their managerial practices. I encourage this even though consistency from management is one of the most frequently stated qualities of the "ideal manager" by participants in my management training seminars.

When employees list the positive characteristics they want in a manager they almost always mention they desire a manager who is consistent and fair. On the flipside, favoritism is almost always listed as the most negative trait that employees despise in a manager.

Usually these comments stem from a common misconception of what consistency, fairness and favoritism mean. At first brush one might think employees want managers to treat everyone equally. When asked this very question employees quickly agree that equal treatment is what they mean by consistency and fairness. But when the concept is explored deeper, equal treatment really isn't what employees want. That's because, deep down, most people know that in some situations there is nothing more unjust than the equal treatment of unequals.

If being consistent actually did mean treating employees equally, then management would treat the poor performer exactly the same as the exemplary performer. If consistency means equality, then management should reward the lazy and indolent worker equal to the diligent and industrious laborer. Likewise, management should trust those they do not trust as if they are trustworthy and respectable. Or, worse yet, apparently managers should treat workers they trust as if they are untrustworthy and those they respect as if they are not respected if they can't trust or respect someone else.

The Declaration of Independence declares that "*all men (and women) are created equal*" and endowed "*with certain unalienable rights.*" This is certainly true. All men were *created* equal and all

should have certain rights by birth. But then something happens. *After* birth men become unequal. Differences arise as people travel divergent paths based upon their own ambitions, desires, beliefs and understanding. Some people do well in life while others do poorly. Some people progress while others remain dormant. Some people succeed where others fail. The choices people make and the actions they take throughout the course of their lives determine their position and status in society. Of course, a person's environment and life conditions also play a part in their developmental opportunities.

Similarly, all employees are equal the day they are hired. They are entitled to certain basic rights outlined in the core values and policies of the company. Every employee deserves to be treated with basic dignity and respect. But, what the employees do *after* they are hired should determine how they are treated beyond the basic rights of employment. Each employee should be treated *differently* — I might even say inconsistently — based upon how he or she performs and behaves in the organization. Individual treatment of individuals and situational responses to situations is the only fair way to manage.

I believe deep down most Americans fancy their country as a meritocracy, where merit is rewarded. We seek an environment where all can rise according to his or her talents. It is the American dream that, through one's own hard work, the cream can rise to the top. The poet, Robert Frost said: "*I don't want to live in a homogenized world. I want the cream to rise.*"

At the end of the day we wish to live in a world where those who do good thrive above the not so good.

Those who profess and practice the equal treatment of all employees will soon find that all incentives to perform well, and all penalties for not performing, vanish. Where there is no incentive to excel, there is no excellence. Where there is no consequence for failure, people fail to perform. Equality often breeds mediocrity. The fact that the second and third string on a team must work hard to become first string makes all strings on the team perform better. Performance only improves when there is a payoff for better performance. When everyone on a team receives a trophy, regardless of one's effort, there is no need to strive for excellence.

Good managers who are honest or introspective know they shouldn't treat employees equally because employees are not equal. Some people have greater skills and talents than others. Some are wiser, more insightful, and capable of making profound decisions; while others are more limited in their scope of understanding. Some

workers are fast, producing twice as much as their colleagues. Some are creative thinkers or great problem solvers, capable of designing next generation products for their employers. Some employees have more value than others because they accomplish more at less cost to the company. Therefore, those who do more deserve more, while those who do less deserve less.

Bad managers treat everyone the same, falsely believing all have the same worth. And in their consistency these managers are unfair and wrong.

Good managers know treating every employee with the same consistency can be grossly *unfair* because employees have different needs in similar situations. One employee, for example, may need great compassion from one's manager while grieving over the loss of a loved one. Another employee may desire just the opposite, wanting the manager to apply more pressure, forcing her to work harder in order to keep her mind off of her loss and grief. One employee may need constant communication and feedback from the manager, while another employee may work better with limited or no interaction with the boss. One worker may put family first and demand more free time, while another employee may be a workaholic and spend long hours at the office. Each worker has his or her different personal and professional needs, requiring a different style and response from one's manager.

Bad managers believe they should treat everyone the same regardless of their situation. They believe what they do for one they must do for all, and what they cannot do for one they cannot do for another. And in their consistency these managers are unfair and wrong.

Myth #2: Managers Must Not Have Favorites

Good managers, who are honest or introspective, admit they have favorites. Good managers favor those who perform well. Good managers favor those they trust over those who work only when the manager is present. Good managers favor those who do their jobs to standard and disfavor those who willingly or spitefully perform poorly. Good managers unhesitatingly provide special favors to those who perform favorably because those favors are predicated upon good performance.

Bad managers wrongly believe that no one deserves special treatment, even if an employee performs extra specially. They believe there are no exceptions to the rules, even though an employee may be exceptional. They offer no favors, even when performance is favorable. And in their consistency these managers are unfair and wrong.

Of course there is a wrong form of favoritism

which bad managers may exhibit that is driven by personal bias or interpersonal relationships. Any type of favoritism that is not based solely on performance is wrong. Good managers can separate their personal views of an employee from their professional assessment based upon the worker's performance.

Good managers often are reluctant to admit they actually do have favorites and do treat people inconsistently, even though such favorable treatment may be subconscious. But I believe managers should consciously and deliberately treat people differently based upon their differences in performance. This is a fundamental management practice – where those who perform to standard are recognized and rewarded, while those who do not perform as expected are coached, counseled or disciplined.

I believe managers should shout from the rooftops that they will treat people inconsistently. Managers should make it obvious to everyone exactly why some people are treated better than others in the workplace. They should make it known that *all* employees can be the manager's favorite if all perform favorably. They should clearly state that they will treat good performers one way and poor performers another. They should let it be known that those who are trustworthy will be trusted, those who are respectable will be respected, those who are supportive will be supported, and those who act dignified will be treated with dignity. Employees need to understand that the way they will be treated by their manager is a reflection of what *they* do and how *they* act at work.

It has been my experience in life that friendly people usually have friends. Those who love others are loved. Those who are kind receive kindness in return. That which one sows, one reaps. This is true in life, and should be true at work.

I have a special name for this reap and sow truism. I call it the "*Life is a Mirror*" principle. Life is a reflection of who one is and how one acts. What a person receives out of life is directly linked to what he or she gives. Grumpy people tend to see the world as a grumpy place. People with negative attitudes generally see the world in a negative light. Happy, optimistic people, on the other hand, usually see the world as upbeat and positive.

Sometimes managers need to remind employees that life is a mirror. Contrary to the Golden Rule of treating people as they *want* to be treated, managers should treat employees the way they *deserve* to be treated. Employees who perform and behave well ought to be treated well, while those who perform and behave poorly ought to be treated less well. The message to employees from *good* managers should be this: "*If you like the way you're treated at work, it's because you*

deserve it. If you don't like the way you're treated, then change your behavior. I'm just mirroring the way you act. I'm treating you the way you deserve to be treated based upon your actions and reactions at work. Life is good when you are good. When you do good and are good you'll feel good."

Although the following ditty from John Gay's *Fables* may be somewhat crude, it seems to somewhat reflect my philosophy:

"By all accounts, let's not be cheated.
"An ass should like an ass be treated."

Even reflective Human Resource professionals know real performance management practices are specifically designed to treat people differently. Good managers recognize and reward those who perform well and coach, counsel and discipline those who do not. It is wrong to treat people consistently in the workplace. It is wrong for you not to show favoritism to those who perform favorably. Hopefully, someday all managers will wake up and recognize the negative impact of perpetuating the two management myths discussed in this article. Someday managers will boldly proclaim their intention to be inconsistent and to have favorites. And someday organizations will realize the performance of their employees will improve significantly when they do. §

Innovative Management Group can help you put in place the performance management policies, processes, procedures, practices and systems necessary to get high performance results from your employees. We teach managers how to truly hold people accountable for their work, ensuring those who perform well are rewarded while those who perform poorly are coached and counseled to raise their productive output.

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