

## **SECTION I**

# CULTIVATE POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

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## Chapter 1

# RELATIONSHIPS CREATE OPPORTUNITIES TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Sometimes moments of enlightenment are not about matters of profound wisdom. But they are moments of enlightenment, nevertheless.

### **Bernie Goes on a Bender**

In the early 1980s, in Atlanta, Georgia, I experienced an important moment of enlightenment about turnover and retention of employees.

I love diners and it is my custom to have breakfast on my way to work. I always eat at the same diner. Over time, I get to know many of the employees, and they get to know me. So it was in Atlanta, during the time I was corporate director of human resources for a prominent hotel company.

One morning, as I walked through the door, Shirley poured my coffee and put in my order. She did not need to ask me; I always had two eggs over easy, with grits, toast, and bacon, crisp. As I took my seat at the counter, I noticed that one of the cooks was not there and had not been working for a few days. So I asked Shirley, “Is Bernie okay?” She replied that he had been absent and had not called in. It was evident that she was worried.

A couple of days later Bernie was back on the line cooking my breakfast. Naturally, I asked what happened. Bernie had gone on a drinking binge (my father would have called it a “bender”) and had finally surfaced in a small

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town many miles away. Someone from the diner had gone there to bring him home. The other employees were very angry with him. In fact, Shirley was not speaking to him.

This was my dramatic moment of enlightenment. Bernie had simply come back to work. Albeit with the need to atone for his transgression, but he had returned to work.

I realized that, in my company, Bernie would have been terminated for “three days no show no call,” because we had a highly sophisticated set of rules and policies that had to be administered consistently. Consequently, we would not have been able to make an exception for Bernie.

Did I mention that Bernie had 17 years’ tenure at this diner? Shirley, who was the low seniority employee, had been there for only 10 years.

This diner, which could not have been more “Mom and Pop,” was out-performing me on the issue of retention. In part, it was because they did not have an employee handbook with a set of policies that required Bernie to be terminated. As I began to reflect on this issue, I realized that the purpose of many of our rules was to make it easy to fire people.

Think about employee orientation and employee handbooks. In many companies, the theme seems to be, “Welcome to our company! We want to make sure you know the reasons you can be punished (up to and including termination!).”

We make everyone sign a document (usually the last page of the handbook) attesting that they have read these rules. We need the signature, of course, in case we have to prove in court that they were aware of the rules and of the consequences of not abiding by them. We start building our case for termination on their first day of work!

You can probably cite numerous reasons why this is a good idea in today’s litigious business environment. Maybe you believe such rules are a good business strategy. Maybe you are a little more ambivalent and would prefer not to have these kinds of rules, but you consider them a necessary evil. Either way, be honest about whether or not they contribute positively to retention. They do not.

In business, we often invest more in ensuring that we can fire our poor performers than we do in retaining our good performers. Rules designed to make it easy to fire people also make it more difficult to retain them.

All human communities have rules and need rules to function effectively. Even that diner had unwritten rules, and Bernie violated one when he did not call to tell his coworkers what was going on. But his punishment was that people were angry. Just like a family. Many organizations say that they are “like a family.” The diner was actually living it.

Why was the diner able to function without a set of written rules? Relationship.

At the diner, people resolved their challenges through relationship rather than rules. That's what this book is about:

## THE POWER AND IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS

The late Dr. William E. Hall taught psychology at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and studied relationships for more than 50 years. He was a pioneer in the field of positive psychology. Dr. Hall defined *relationship* in this way: “Relationship is the response one human being makes to another human being.” This might strike you as oversimplified. It struck me that way when I first heard it. But over the past 25 years, I have come to appreciate its wisdom. Just think about it for a minute. If I respond to you in ways that you view as helpful or supportive in some way, you characterize our relationship as positive. If I respond to you in ways that you consider unhelpful, unsupportive, or hurtful, you characterize our relationship as negative. If I do not respond to you, we do not have a relationship.

If you are a manager, the relationships you cultivate with people have tremendous power. This book will help you cultivate the kinds of relationships that make a difference. People spend the majority of their waking hours at work. How can you cultivate the kinds of relationships that get people excited about coming to work, win their loyalty to your leadership, and cement their commitment to your organization? Building those kinds of relationships matters, not just because people matter but also because those kinds of relationships drive the growth and profitability of organizations. Here are some eye-opening research findings about how managers make a difference:

1. Managers do the coaching that hones potential into top performance. Top performers are 19 to 48 percent more productive than others, depending on the type of job.<sup>1</sup>
2. Managers influence at least 75 percent of the reasons people give for voluntary job turnover.<sup>2</sup>
3. The impact managers have on engagement and turnover goes straight to the bottom line. Disengaged employees cost organizations \$3,400 for every \$10,000 in salary, and turnover costs range from 48 to 61 percent of an employee's annual salary.<sup>3</sup>

In this book we provide a lot of concrete suggestions for managing to make a difference—so many suggestions that we do not expect anybody to try them all. Our purpose is to help you identify approaches that suit your unique style. Think of your part of the organization as your laboratory. You are in the laboratory every day. You can experiment with different tools and tactics. Just pick something that

appeals to you and try it. And then pay attention to your results. If it works for you, keep doing it. If it does not work, quit doing it.

The suggestions we offer come from over 50 years of combined leadership and consulting experience focused on best practices in engaging, retaining, and developing top performers. We have partnered with individuals and organizations to create great places to work in which people grow and relationships thrive. We do not claim that our approach is the only way, but it is effective, positive, and affirming. It is the furthest thing from motivational fluff. It is reality-based in every way.

The successful use of these best practices involves accepting the following realities:

1. Relationships in the workplace matter. In particular, the relationship between an employee and his or her manager has the biggest impact on that person's engagement, retention, and development. Therefore, as a manager, you can make a huge difference.
2. Adults have identifiable patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behavior that are deeply ingrained and very difficult to change. We will call these patterns "themes."
3. Aptitude exists. Aptitude is the natural *potential* to do certain things really well—possibly at a very high level of excellence. In discussing aptitude, we will often use the words *talent* and *giftedness*.
4. Every person has aces and spaces—things they naturally do well and things they naturally just do not do well.

One more thing before you dig in. It is important to recognize that the results you are getting now are based on the ways you are doing things now. If you want the same results going forward, do things the same way. If you want significantly improved results, you have to have the courage to ask, "What can I do differently?" We recognize that there are real risks involved in trying new methods. That is why it takes courage. But it is the only way to improve. If you have the courage to experiment, we offer some great places to start.