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“TAKE TIME TO SEE THE ‘WHOLE PICTURE’ WHEN MISTAKES HAPPEN”

It has been said that we judge others by their actions and ourselves by our intentions. If we judged others by their intentions rather than taking their actions at face value, there would be less reactive behavior, there would be more opportunities to learn from mistakes, and interpersonal conflicts would be greatly reduced. Unfortunately, here is an example of what seems to be happening more frequently in the workplace:

Betsy, a marketing assistant, found stacks of packets that were left on a table in the department conference room at the end of the business day. They were the new promotional brochures that were supposed to be mailed out but apparently had been left or forgotten. Everyone had gone home for the day, and she could not reach her boss on his cell phone. So she had to make a judgment call.

As she understood it, these packets had to get into the mail by end of business day that day in order for the timing to coincide with other aspects of the marketing campaign. A caring and responsible person, Betsy stayed late, made sure that all the addresses were correct, and personally took them to the post office so that they would get out on time. She missed dinner with her family for having done so, but felt proud that she had taken the initiative to keep the project on course.

The next morning, her manager came into her office asking where the packets were that had been left on the table in the conference room. Proud of her initiative, Betsy explained that she had stayed late to get the packets mailed out on time. But instead of offering kudos of appreciation, her manager ranted, raved and scolded Betsy for her actions.

Betsy remained composed, and explained her perspective, including the fact that no one had told her otherwise. Her actions were based solely on what she felt were in the best interests of the company, reflecting her commitment to the success of the project. Despite the assistant’s rational explanation, the manager was unable to see anything but the problem at hand, and the headaches that they had caused for him.

His anger was further fuelled by the fear in anticipation of his own boss’s intolerant reaction when she found out. He was also unwilling or unable to acknowledge his own piece of the problem – that he had not communicated the mistakes that were discovered and the subsequent change in plans. Blind to his own deficiencies, he needed someone to blame.

The manager continued to be unforgiving, unable to see or acknowledge the intentions of the dedicated assistant. Because this reflected the regular way of the manager’s behavior and not an isolated incident, the assistant eventually realized that she would never be appreciated, and left the company. What a loss to the business: dedicated help is rare, and turnover is costly.

Here is something to think about: what if we slowed down and took the time to see the intentions of others underneath their behavior? What if we had the courage to accept more accountability for our own piece of the problem? Once this mistake was made, it could not be reversed. However, the team might have brainstormed a strategy to deal with the short-term issue, and could have done some “Monday morning quarterbacking” to assess how they could prevent such a problem from occurring again in the future.

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