

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

“Thank you. You did a great job!”

Posted: 10 Nov 2010, 10:15AM

In a guest column in a recent edition of *The New York Times*, a corporate consultant warned that companies should focus more on retention than on downsizing. Jon Picoult suggested that a turnover storm is looming, and that those employees who feel treated like equipment rather than as people will leave their companies as soon as they are financially able. He concluded that managers who are "more communicative, more appreciative, more connected, and more civil" will retain valued employees more successfully than those who see their employees as "investment capital".

This raises the ongoing debate on the role of the corporate manager. Is the manager a coach or a task master? Should a manager care about the emotional wellbeing of his or her direct reports, or is the only criterion for a manager's success the productivity he or she gets out of the team?

It's my experience that women managers are more likely to see their role as involving awareness of an employee's personal life. Though I have been impressed by the sensitivity of many male managers, men are more likely to measure success by what numbers they bring in.

Not having a corporate background, other than that I've gained through my spouse's musings, and from my observations as a consultant, I don't know what pressure managers face to produce, nor do I know if there is a universally accepted standard of success for managers to follow. But I do know that employees seem to feel more valued when they get personal attention from their boss.

"I don't care if they give me a bonus, though that would be nice", the checkout lady told me at the grocery store. "But it sure makes a difference when they say, 'Thank you. You're doing a great job, and we appreciate how hard you work'."

"Do you get that feedback?" I asked as I helped pack the produce.

"I did today, and it felt great," she said. "The regional manager was in, and he made a point of talking to each of us."

"Well, I thank you for your service, Darleen," I said. "You're great at your work, and I appreciate it."

Darleen lit up like a birthday cake, and said, "Why, aren't you nice. You have a good day, you hear?"

My former mail carrier laughed when I asked her if she ever got thanked by her supervisor at the Post Office.

"Are you kidding?" she asked in amazement. "They never say anything to us. It's all work, work, work. I can't wait to quit this job."

She did quit soon after, and we haven't had a regular mail carrier since. I stopped our latest delivery person recently to thank her. She said, "Oh, you're one of the good ones."

"I don't like all of this 'touchy-feely' stuff," more than one manager has said in my diversity sessions. "Leave your private life at home. Do your job. That's all I care about. I don't care if you're married, divorced, gay, purple, or whatever. Just do your job. That's what you were hired for. That's what you're paid for."

Given the poor condition of the economy, many people may feel that employees who haven't been laid-off have it good, and shouldn't complain about an insensitive boss because they too can be fired for rocking the boat. That's a dangerous and counter-productive attitude for a couple of reasons. When the economy improves, talented people will have the freedom to leave, and those graduating from college who are seeking jobs will be better able to be selective. If a company has a bad reputation in the community for how it treats its employees, it will suffer in its efforts to attract and retain the best talent.

In Toronto, Dallas, Hong Kong, London, Singapore, Atlanta, Tokyo, and Mumbai, when I assert that all anyone wants is to trust that they can come to work and feel safe and valued, nearly all heads nod in agreement. Almost everyone concurs that a happy employee is not only loyal, but also more productive.

It would seem logical, then, that there be an established standard for managerial success that includes strong emphasis on treating employees as people, not a means to make numbers, and that validation, politeness, and expressed gratitude be criteria for advancement.