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Five Myths about Managers

Martha Nelson

1. Now that you have the title of "manager," people will do what you want.

It takes more than a title to get things done. Yes, supervisors can tell people to do things "because I'm the boss and I say so," but that should be the last resort. Your title confers what social scientists John French and Bertram Raven call "legitimate power" -- the authority of office. But if you rely solely on your title, you're all badge and no sheriff. You need to understand and employ **all forms of power**: expert (what you know), reward (how you thank), coercive (how you sanction), referent (how you inspire), information (what knowledge you share) and legitimate (where you rank in the hierarchy). The folks who work for you are neither sheep nor servants, and they respond best when they respect you as a leader.

2. Managers should keep their distance from employees.

I firmly believe (and have written before): Leadership is personal. That means you see your staff as human beings, not "head count." That means you know more about them than just what they produce for you. It does not mean that you are everyone's best buddy. New managers often ask me about the challenge of managing old pals. **Can the boss be a friend?** It's not impossible, but it's challenging. Friendship implies a primary loyalty; a boss has obligations to the whole team. But the boss can be genuinely *friendly* -- caring about the happiness, health and humanity of staff.

3. Managers should be the first to arrive at work and the last to leave.

Yes, you want to be known as a hard worker. Yes, you want to let people know that you don't ask anything of them that you wouldn't ask of yourself. Yes, you have a ton of work to do. But managers who assume they must open and close the shop each day are causing more harm than they know. They are stressing their staff, who watch them and think the message is, "Work like me or you won't succeed."

Those managers are stressing themselves and their families, too. My advice: Be strategic about your work schedule. When times are tough or the project is crucial, power up your presence. Let people know why you're there. But be equally aware that you send a message by working reasonable hours on regular days: that work/life harmony (I say "harmony" because we're rarely balanced) is important.

4. Managers should hire good people and get out of their way.

This one sounds so good on the surface, doesn't it? And the bosses who say they do it are probably pretty humble. They're not letting on that they do much more. After they hire talented people, they're vigilant about removing obstacles to their success. They may get them support or training, change systems that hold them back, lobby on behalf of their ideas or negotiate for needed resources. "Getting out of the way," in fact, involves a lot of hard work.

5. The manager should be the smartest person on the team.

You were promoted to management because you were successful at something. You bring expertise to the table, and that's good. But managers who think they have to top everyone's ideas and experience are self-defeating. A great symphony conductor doesn't play every instrument, but knows how to get the best from each musician. The perceived need to be the smartest person on the team can lead to tension and frustration because no one who works for you can ever hit your mark. Consider the philosophy I share while teaching a class -- that there's already valuable wisdom in the room. Your job is to help people share it and build on it.