

The “Mr Nice Guy” syndrome

In our business we often coach “Mr. Nice Guy” (and also “Mrs. Nice Guy” – the syndrome is prevalent in both sexes). Invariably these managers, and even senior directors, are outwardly very friendly, even excessively so. If you are familiar with the Human Synergistics® Leadership model, they score high on the Approval style. Whilst there is nothing wrong with being a friendly leader, problems begin when the person’s overall driver is to maintain harmony at any price. This leads to conflict avoidance and an inability to give necessary feedback to correct and improve performance, a key responsibility for anyone in a managerial position.

Recently, for example, I was coaching a manager, let’s call him Fred, whose unit was chronically underperforming. On paper, Fred’s direct reports were all capable of doing their jobs and 1-on-1 interviews with them did not turn up any attitudinal problems toward their working environment or the specific tasks they were assigned. The problem turned out to be with the performance objectives, or KPIs that were set, and the on-going feedback Fred was giving them during the year.

Fred’s overriding objective was to not “offend” his subordinates by setting “hard” – or what we would call “stretch” – goals for his direct reports. And the same non-conflictual approach stopped him from giving them specific feedback to correct performance that was not meeting their already soft objectives. Fred’s main management strategy was to be nice to his subordinates, to be a smiling, friendly manager. In his mind, giving them feedback to improve performance that fell below standard would mean they would view him as “Mr. Bad Guy”, not their friend. Paradoxically, he was not really liked by his subordinates and, critically, none of them fully respected him as a manager.

Our coaching started by pointing out to Fred that everybody needs to get honest, objective and timely feedback on how they are doing, whether they are performing well or whether they need to make improvement in some aspect of their work. As long as this feedback is

delivered in an empathetic way, the result will be employees that appreciate the opportunities to learn and grow on the job.

By suggesting specific feedback templates including timely intervention and specific word to use, our coach was able to greatly improve Fred's ability to give quality feedback to the people in his department. It took time, high-approval individuals tend to respond more slowly than average, but his departmental objectives now meet the "stretch" objectives in the overall strategic plan and, most importantly, his employees are for the most part meeting and sometimes exceeding them.

The key tool used by our coach was a 360° profile from the Human Synergistics® suite of leadership diagnostic profiles. Don't hesitate to contact me if you would like more on how our coach turned this situation around.

