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Management Lessons From "The Office"

By Toddi Gutner

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Dear Mr. Scott,

We don't know each other, but I recently had the opportunity to observe you a number of times at your office in your position as the regional manager of the Scranton, Pennsylvania, office for the paper company Dunder Mifflin.

Forgive my presumptuousness, but as a management and leadership columnist for a website that targets small businesses like yours, I thought I could offer some advice that may help you turn what appears to be a dysfunctional office into a functional one.

You seem like a nice guy who strongly values the opinions of others. While those are admirable qualities outside of the workplace, they get in the way of you effectively doing your job in the office.

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Let me be frank: You're trying too hard to be a friend and a peer to your employees, rather than a leader and manager. It seems you have trouble understanding that to be an effective leader, you actually need to be separate from your employees — not "one of the gang." In addition, you can't take things too personally and let yourself manage based on your emotions.

Let me give you an example. On one of the days I observed you at work, you were extremely hurt and offended that you were left out of the office gossip loop. In retaliation, you spread untrue rumors around the office just so you could be at the heart of the gossip mill instead of on the outside.

While your humanness was endearing, it seemed to get in the way of your ability to turn the situation around. You might have considered holding an employee meeting and discussing the hurtful impact of office gossip. I realize many employees have little tolerance for sensitivity training exercises, but in this litigious day and age, it wouldn't hurt to apprise them of all the behaviors deemed off limits in the workplace, from bullying to gossiping.

I must also say, I admire your willingness and effort to engage your employees and motivate them to do a good job. However, it seems as though you often hinder your employees' development rather than help it. Let me share with you one situation that illustrates this point.

One day when I visited your office, an employee had come to you with an idea on how to improve company operations. I overheard the idea and thought it was quite good. But rather than support your employee and inform upper management of the game-changing idea, you kept it to yourself out of fear that you wouldn't get any credit.

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This is an example of when it's important to realize that everyone wins — both the manager and the employee — when someone on your team does well. When your staff is effective, upper management figures that you, the regional manager, had a hand in it — even if an idea or action isn't directly yours.

One last piece of advice: Attracting and retaining the best and brightest talent is often tied to the leader in charge. What I mean is that professionals want to work for a manager they admire — who has the skills and leadership qualities they want to attain or emulate. In other words, professionals look to managers as role models and mentors in the office.

I hate to say it, Michael, but when I think of the days I peered in on you, I can't imagine wanting to emulate your managerial actions. Have you ever heard of the saying, "Be the change you want to see"? Perhaps if you think of yourself in those terms, office productivity will increase, office politics will decrease, and Dunder Mifflin will beat those competitors' sales numbers once again.

Take it from me, Michael: Stay one step ahead, and you won't be left behind.

Good luck.

Sincerely,

Toddi Gutner
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Toddi Gutner is an award-winning journalist, writer and editor and currently a contributing writer covering personal finance for Reuters.

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