

# Brutal Honesty

Does brutal honesty still work as a management style these days? In the 8 May 2016 Corner Office (one of my favorite sections) in the NY Times, Jimmy Dunne III, managing principal of Sandler O'Neill & Partners, says he always delivers truth in the moment (meaning in the moment, in public) without Novocain.

I've been publicly dressed down as a first year associate in a law firm to the level of being asked if I got my law degree in a bubble gum machine in front of the entire office. I can't say that motivated me to do better work for that managing partner, but it did motivate me to find my way out and into a better environment. It made me look at management styles and promise to never be that manager. Now brutal honesty doesn't always have to mean being brutal and degrading but once it's done in public it takes on a different tenor and the slightest nuanced phrase or sarcastic statement could be viewed that way and be incredibly demotivating.

In the age of the millennials, can brutal honesty be expressed? I've been re-watching Friday Night Lights on Netflix recently and it's a show that's so honest it hurts. Coach Taylor lays it all out on the field to get the kids to strive for excellence in life and football and his wife does the same in the guidance counselor's office trying to get students to push for what they don't think they can do...but those are different times and a different place then the work environment aren't they? Can we be that truthful with the generation that has gotten participation trophies and told they are great at everything they do?

If I'm being brutally honest, I think we have to be; but we don't have to do it in public to people like Jimmy Dunne III. I'm not saying there is never a time to do that; however, I don't see it being the motivational push most of us need, especially the millennials.

Honesty is supposed to encourage and motivate, not alienate. This type of open and honest communication has to come from the top of the organization. They need to be willing to invite honest feedback themselves in order for this culture to be cultivated. Knowing where you stand and how you are viewed is critical to self-assessment and goal setting and actually goes hand-in-hand with the millennials need for constant feedback.

Let's find the balance of brutal honesty without the brutality.

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## The Appliance Bulb Employee

How many times do you hear managers say, "Why can't my employees think for themselves? No one thinks for themselves anymore!"

It's hard to accept that not every employee is going to be a 1000 watt bulb shining brightly and

illuminating us all; it's even harder to accept that we can't make them into one. As a good leader and manager you want everyone to do their best and think through every issue and permutation of a problem and come up with solutions, but let's face it - they can't all do that. You know what it's like to get an email from that one employee saying we need to do "x" and the first thing that comes to mind is well, did you look into "y", did you find out what happens if we go with "z"? Did you research this at all? Have you heard of Google? Can't you think for yourself? You quickly become disappointed and in many ways disenfranchised.

Take a look at whether you enable this behavior. Ask yourself:

- Do you give typically supply an answer - it is the quickest and fastest way to get to the solution - or do you encourage employees to think on their own?
- Do you encourage employees to provide alternative solutions to problems?
- Do you let your employees know that it's ok if mistakes are made as long as research was done?

Try this out then see how the employee reacts. Ask them - what would you do if I wasn't here? If they just can't think for themselves; that may be ok depending on the job they have.

The simple reality is that not everyone is or can be a 1000 watt bulb; we all need appliance bulbs too - the kind that turn on when you open the doors and turn off when you close them. They get things done but they really can't think for themselves and they rely on you, as the manager, to do that. These employees are typically good soldiers who take orders. They can be counted on to get jobs done when the instructions are laid out clearly.

Help your employees reach their potential and accept them for who and what they are to your organization - no matter what wattage light bulb they may be.

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## The Least Common Denominator Management Theory

Do you have a team or division where the turnover ratios aren't matching the rest of the company over an extended period of time? Is there a division which has consistent personnel issues and the culture seems different than the rest of the company - basically it breeds negativity?

Go back to elementary school math and find the least common denominator (LCD):

- If not readily available, have your HR team provide you a list of all the employees in that division/team;
- Get the list of the terminated employees by year in the division and cause of terminations;
- Look for the least common denominator to all the terminations

You will not be surprised by what you find but it's a hard truth to face. You probably already know this manager is a problem but in business (and life) we find ways to protect certain people by justifying their actions based on customer desires, productivity, rain making, etc...to the detriment of so many others. We don't admit to ourselves they are the LCD.

The numbers don't lie.

We've all seen the statistics on costs of turnover and negative energy on our organizations. While we can argue the true costs of productivity loss and ramp up time depending on positions, its clear there are large scale hard dollar costs of turnover as well as cultural and environmental costs which are hard to quantify. The worst of which is the disenfranchisement of good employees and de-motivation of watching under-performing employees skate by and managers letting it happen. Once the good employee doesn't care anymore they are lost and it's nearly impossible to bring them back into the fold. Eventually they leave. How many good employees have to leave before you recognize the LCD and do something about it?

As a manager myself, it's hard to admit that our employees more likely than not leave because of what we did as managers. It's our style, our philosophy, our handling of difficult and diverse situations that determines how our employees view us. The organization tries to implement a certain culture and code but individual managers remain the front line to creating the environments for our employees.

Look across your organization and see if you have an LCD and address it sooner than later; the longer this person is entrenched in your organization the worse the overall effect.

Find and address your LCDs, we all have them.