

DON'T BITE THE HAND THAT FEED(BACK)S YOU

This week I have been rehearsing a show for the President's Concert and at times I have felt utterly frustrated at the progress or lack thereof. One evening in particular, when it had all got too much, I shouted and screamed at my young starry-eyed cast (many of whom have never been in a show before), bemoaning their ineptness and basically doing a good job of making them feel incompetent, foolish and lazy. On my way home after practise my daughter drily commented that she would be surprised if anyone came back the following night, citing the inappropriateness and insensitivity of my words and deeds – I had said, for example, that they were lacking in energy, without taking into account that many of them had been at school since very early that morning yet were still rehearsing at 8pm, and she questioned what the point was in de-motivating everyone and how such behaviour was supposed to result in better on-stage performance.

Huh! No way was I about to take that from a mere slip of a girl. What does she know? She hasn't been to business school or benefited from years of consulting for countless blue chip companies on productivity and motivation. She hasn't managed, mentored and trained staff or coped with pressure like I have and besides she's only 14.

Of course you don't have to be a genius to see where this is going. Her common sense hung around the house for the next few hours like a malevolent spirit, making me feel more and more guilty and stupid. I was the incompetent, foolish and lazy one here. Incompetent for not handling the situation better, foolish because I know better and lazy because I did not resolve my frustrations in a way would have been more appropriate, albeit longer time-wise.

The next day I bought doughnuts and cold drinks for the cast in an effort to win back my favour – make no mistake, whatever shape, size or form management blunders take, they are always costly. How easy it is to make errors of judgement as a manager. How easy it is to get caught up in pushing for results and forgetting that when it gets down to it results are simply a product of people's motives and actions which are themselves products of personal circumstances, training and development and motivation, I didn't take into account their ages, lack of experience and exhaustion and I failed to raise their enthusiasm and boost their self-confidence. I was a hundred percent at fault and yet how easy it would have been to ignore the feedback I was given because I was the grown-up and the expert.

To err is human and as managers we will make mistakes. We have bad days, we feel the pressure and we still sometimes make mistakes even when we know better. What is important however is recognising that you are human and therefore subject to the odd episode of human error. Y'see too many bosses have that 'manager knows best' mentality, the belief that somehow as supervisors we are super-human, have super-vision and are devoid of blame. That super-iority complex allows you to excuse anything away just because of the nature of your position.

They forget the other 'supers' – super-cilious, super-ficial and if you're not careful super-annuated and super-fluous., Just like my cast of young wannabe thespians, employees too see through a poor management style. It sticks out like Kgale hill! They can see the sham, the error of the ways and they look at you as if you arrived from Mars; foreign and hopelessly out of touch. I should have never been so badly behaved and out-of-order in the first place but then hindsight is indeed a wonderful thing.

You see we all don't have the benefit of a blunt and forward 14 year old metaphorically sitting on our shoulder reminding us of the error of our ways. But maybe we should have. In the work environment too many managers are not open to adverse comment and giving feedback upwards can be a career-shattering move. But because managers are all potentially fallible, 360-degree feedback is critical if we are really to get a gauge on how we are faring in the motivation department.

360-degree feedback is a method and a tool that provides each manager with the opportunity to receive performance appraisals from his or her supervisor, four to eight peers, reporting staff members, co-workers and customers. Most 360-degree feedback tools are also responded to by each individual as self-assessment. In effect it gives people the opportunity to say we think you are an ass without repercussions – and subsequently the opportunity for you to be accountable for your performance and do something about it. Yet I know of hardly any company here that has this sort of robust system in place where managers may regularly receive such feedback on how they are behaving.

In my recent theatre setting the feedback was obvious, not only from the recriminating remarks made by my daughter but the downcast look on the faces of my performers. How easy it would have been to push any self-doubts aside and act like the bad workman blaming his tools, in this case a troop of enthusiastic but worn-out amateurs. Thank goodness for fearless feedback, fourteen-year-old adjudicators of fair-play and the forgiveness of big-hearted junior hoofers under the footlights.

