

## LET THEM EAT CAKE

We've all heard the expression 'stick or carrot approach'. It's a saying relating to getting work out of a stubborn donkey – do you coax it with a tempting carrot or do you just give it a hard slap on the behind with a stick – which method works best? It's a similar dilemma in our own work situations. Not that we ever beat out employees – that went out with Roman galley slaves – but the idea of loss of privilege or pay-cut type of punishment for poor performance has been replaced if not by a carrot then at least some tea and sympathy in the form of empathetic counseling. But how effective is this gentle, enlightened approach?

About six months ago, I had an employee who had just such a performance problem. It was important that I handle the situation but I was unsure what the best way to go about doing it was. It had been going on for quite a while and though the issue may have been seen as small it was meaningfully disruptive, just not significant enough to warrant disciplinary action. Previous attempts at counselling had proved fruitless and it had become a thorn in my side which had been annoying me for ages – but not quite enough for me to do something drastic about it.

Most managers have been in the situation where an employee's performance is not meeting their expectations. Sometimes the reaction is to avoid having a conversation with the hope that the problem will resolve itself. More often than not, as in my case, the manager will allow the problem to persist until he or she eventually reaches breaking point and just can't tolerate it any longer. That was where I found myself. All attempts at corrective action; counselling, motivating, threatening, pleading and sometimes even screaming (just because I preach management doesn't mean I am any good at it), had failed and hence the dilemma – 'how do I handle it this time?' Punishment came to mind; as I felt justified now that conventional 'improving performance' methods had bombed. I know that we are not supposed to use the word 'punishment' as this has been superceded with the euphemism 'corrective action' but I felt desperate and desperate times requires desperate measures. Now to my mind there are just two types of punishment applicable to the work place; one involves doing something to the employee that they do not like (giving undesirable assignments, offering fewer bonus, demotion, limiting access to resources etc).

Another is taking something away from them, for example reducing the chance of promotion, less flexibility etc. Although management books do not recommend punishment, it does not mean that management should be overly permissive, allowing employees to do anything they want, virtually without limits. And while some people think punishment is bad I believe permissiveness is even more harmful to an employee in the long run. Here you can use the analogy of the old English proverb that says *'spare the rod and spoil the child'*, meaning that punishing a child with the occasional smack is for its own good in terms of character-building and learning right from wrong. So perhaps punishment is sometimes necessary if all other routes to stop or reduce serious negative behaviour have been tested and found wanting?

But does punishment, in the broadest sense, work or is it the desperate act of managers who don't know what else to do? Think about our mindsets when we punish. If we thought anything else would work or we were not at the end of our personal ropes, we probably wouldn't take such actions.

Studies have been done comparing the use of punishment and discipline in the work situation with Chinese and American managers where there is a great ideological and cultural divide. Unsurprisingly Americans generally do not believe that punishment should be used to resolve conflict or to motivate people. Of course, that doesn't mean that punishment is absent from American organisations. But punishment is administered formally, not by giving poor work assignments etc. but through the performance management system. In contrast, many Chinese managers believe that punishment can and should be used to motivate effective performance. For example, at one Chinese firm, employees may be demoted, lose part of their salary, or be penalised in other ways for failing to meet performance goals. Also American and Chinese managers have different ideas about what constitutes punishment. At the same Chinese company, performance ratings are posted prominently for everyone to see. In addition, low performers are asked to describe their failures to the group and explain how they will improve. According to some Chinese respondents, this public display of performance data and encouraging public reflection on poor performance builds moral character, which contributes to effective leadership and effective performance at work – back to not sparing the rod. However, for American managers, these practices constitute punishment and personal humiliation, and they are deemed inappropriate for use at work. American managers are taught to focus on behaviour and not the person when evaluating performance. In addition, managers are advised to discuss performance problems with their subordinates in private.

Years of practice and brainwashing, if you will, in what good management is made me finally steer clear of the punishment route and eventually I was guided by something that I had heard years before. One evening an old Cherokee Indian told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, "My son, the battle is between two wolves inside us all. One is Evil. It is anger, envy jealousy, sorrow, greed, arrogance, self-pity, laziness, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego. The other is Good. It is honesty, happiness, peace, love hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, enthusiasm, generosity, truth and compassion." The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: "Which wolf wins?" The old Cherokee simply replied, "the one you feed."

So I re-examined the performance problem with this employee whose one aspect of behaviour had niggled and annoyed me. I compared this with all the positive contributions the employee had made and decided that I would not draw attention to, or waste any energy on., that which I disliked and instead would nurture and feed all the positive contributions and good work that they had done. Six months on I have a star performer and an entrenched belief that focusing on the good is far more effective than punishing the bad. To put it another way, what goes better with a little tea and sympathy than a large slice of carrot cake?

