



3 Rules to Help Managers Navigate the Minefields

By Thomas Herrington

For most first line managers, survival can be a challenge. As a first line manager you answer to the employee, customer/supplier, and your own management team. It feels as though you are treading through a minefield. No where are the mines hidden better than the interaction with employees. Here are three rules that have helped me throughout the years avoid some the common mistakes.

Rule #1: If you hear anything that is personal related such as drugs, alcohol, depression, psychiatrist, or any mental issues call personnel. There may be specific legal issues involved in dealing with performance under these circumstances. You are not a lawyer and it's difficult to keep up with changes regarding employment. That being said you still have responsibility to be informed.

If you don't know who your personnel person is find out as soon as possible and establish a working relationship. Personnel can be a tremendous help. Unfortunately it happens all too often the call to personnel is made after a situation has already exploded and it's far too late.

Several years ago on the front page of the Wall Street Journal a story appeared about an executive who was terminated due to lack of performance. His performance did in fact decline but during that time he complained about his depression. Since no one addressed his depression, he sued and won \$1 million under the American Disabilities Act. The article did not say what happened to his manager.

Rule #2: If it is performance oriented you address it but an important caveat to remember is never surprise your manager. Performance issues that go ignored do not go away, they usually become worse. If you have a situation that is likely to become a serious issue keep your management team informed. Managers do not like surprises unless it's their birthday or a holiday, and that might be a stretch for most. I have never seen a boat full of managers ever sink, but if you are in that dingy all by yourself, you better be a good swimmer.

Rule #3: Never forget you are a manager and act accordingly. No matter what time of day or where you are at, you are an officer or manager of your company and you should behave accordingly. Of the three rules this one is the most violated and the repercussions are usually devastating.

Years ago I had an assignment that was temporary. The assignment was a training ground for future managers. Consequently almost every week there was a promotion party for someone returning back to their area. My manager on occasion would make a brief appearance and express congratulations. What caught my attention was that he made a point of saying goodbye to most everyone at the party. When I asked why, his response was *"I want everyone there to know that I was not there when it happened."* I asked, *"When what happened."* He smiled and said, *"Whatever, I would rather hear about it, and I usually do, in the sobriety of my office the next day."*

I follow that to this day. I am not suggesting that you shy away from your employees but be careful. Simple things like laughing at a questionable joke or comment may appear that you agree or you are OK with it. In addition, I would not suggest answering questions or discussing one's performance or development over drinks or a get together. These are matters that are worthy of your full attention in your office.

I tend to take about 5 minutes to review these rules in every session where performance management is a key objective. It never surprises me how many seasoned executives will write these down and nod their heads in approval.

These rules have served me well over the years. You may think of others to add to the list. I try to keep it simple so I can remember them. Trying to remember too much can be overwhelming and can make it even more difficult to perform, or too timid to act. Having the utmost respect for your employees, customers, suppliers and management team may be all you need to add. It's worked for me and I believe it will work for you as well.

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