

By treating an employee extra-special with these tickets, I knew that when we met for our difficult talk, she would be in an appreciative mood, would want to please me, and most of all would recognize that I really respected and cared for her as a person, even though I felt the need to address an uncomfortable issue.

At other times, I needed to ask a great employee—usually a manager—to do something inconvenient, even though he or she might currently be putting in a stellar performance. Often, this involved transferring to another store to improve its performance, or just stepping in temporarily if another store was experiencing specific short-term difficulties. Obviously, asking a manager to work at a different branch could be extremely disruptive to his or her life. For example, it might mean a longer commute, longer hours, or working in a less pleasant environment—and sometimes, even relocation.

Under these circumstances—even when I really couldn't afford to give the manager in question a choice (with the exception of a relocation, which I would never force someone to do)—it was certainly my preference for him to *choose* to do what I was requesting. Therefore, I always presented what I needed, explained how much it would help the company and mean to me personally, and then I allowed the individual employee to sleep on whether to accept the move or not. I wanted him to *own* the decision, because when someone is “on board” of his own volition, he is much more effective. On the very, very rare occasions in which the employee didn't now volunteer, I would then ask more directly, or even say, “I am sorry, but I need you to do this for the company.”

Judgment Calls

It didn't take me long in my position to learn to recognize employees who didn't take responsibility for their own decisions, as well as those employees who were resistant to change that was necessary. By and large, I knew, these were people who would never fulfill their potential and would not add much to our corporate culture. Such employees are almost always detrimental to their companies, much like having a sulking player on the bench of a sports team. One person's negativity and lack of motivation can ruin the whole team's chemistry.

Ultimately, I was forced to let most of these “toxic” employees go, but I *did* retain some who had other redeeming qualities. I then continually tried to motivate these individuals, and once in a while, my efforts were rewarded by unexpected change after a long period of resistance. Doug Chris, one of our assistant managers, is a wonderful example.

Doug was a tall, strong guy with a very tough exterior. More than once, I remember him telling me, “Todd, I’ll work hard for you but I don’t want to hear any more of this Tony Robbins stuff. I’m not into your cult-like ideas.”

This rejection, of course, didn’t stop me from trying to shift Doug’s surly and skeptical persona. After all, I knew better than anyone just how much change was indeed possible! One particular day as I was extolling the virtues of positivity, Doug burst out in a louder-than-usual voice and said, “Todd, my grandfather was always negative, my father was *totally* negative, and I am thus destined for the same. So just give me a break! I’m not going to change.” Doug continued to make his case and remained very negative, often saying that everything bad happened to *him*. For example, if it was raining outside, it rained more on him than on anyone else.

Clearly, Doug wasn’t going to change anytime soon. In fact, I think that he actually enjoyed feeling sorry for himself, which, he figured, was his “right” due to his “inherited” negative personality. And then Doug had a son. About a year after his son’s birth, we met. This time, I didn’t go into my customary positivity spiel. Instead, I congratulated Doug and told him how special fatherhood was. We talked for a little while. In the course of our conversation, I confided, “You’ve proven to me that I can’t change you. But do you really want your son to grow up like you, cynical, negative, and unhappy?”

I could tell from Doug’s face that I had hit a nerve. Pressing my advantage, I added, “You know, Doug, you were right—studies do show that kids grow up to be like their parents, not how their parents *tell* them to be.”

Now Doug, the big tough guy with the hard exterior, broke down and admitted, “No, I don’t want that for him. I don’t want him to be miserable like me. I want him to be happy. I want to change for him. Todd, please help me to change for my son.”

Of course, I was all too happy to share everything I had learned with Doug. And a lesson I had already known from my own personal experience was reinforced that day: *People will always do more for their children than they will do for themselves.*

These sorts of personal encounters with my employees were honestly the aspect of my job that I enjoyed the most. Making money for money’s sake, as I’ve said, gives me very little satisfaction. What *does* give me satisfaction is being there for others when they are in need. Sometimes, I’d even go to an employee’s home in the evening if there was a problem I thought I could help with. For me, being a leader is about helping people to become better dads, moms, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, and friends. I tried to do that by encouraging our

people to make changes in their lives that would lead to more personal happiness.

If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude.

—Maya Angelou

Emphasizing Service

If my approach to my employees was all about developing the right relationships, I was also insistent that my employees in general—and our store managers and sales supervisors in particular—worked hard to develop the same types of relationships with our customers.

To foster the relationships that would inspire customer loyalty, around 1997 I told my store managers that they needed to act more like the saleswomen you see at Bloomingdale's. In other words, they needed to take a truly personal interest in their customers. At first, this proposed strategy did not go over very well at all! We were selling car parts, general sentiment ran, not perfume and designer duds.

Eventually, though, my store employees embraced the need to be more sensitive to their customers' feelings and to show tangible signs of appreciation for their patronage. For example, many store managers now got into the habit of writing thank-you notes and sending birthday cards to their most loyal customers. I believe that the feeling of being valued and appreciated that my people got from my letters and messages helped them to see the benefits of likewise writing these notes to their own customers as well.

From a managerial standpoint, I also knew that if my team was willing to build better face-to-face relationships with our customers, this would bring us more business *and* it would cause our customers to be less price-conscious. I truly believe that business and life are all about relationships, and the more you invest in them, the more you get back.