6 WAYS TO BE A BETTER BOSS

Making a list, checkin' it twice ...

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Having missed the mailing deadline for letters to Santa, I'm converting my wish list into a list of New Year's Resolutions. I sat down, put myself in bankers' shoes, and asked, "How can I be a better boss this year?"

1. Hire wisely.

I'm going to practice my active listening skills, instead of listening to the sound of my own voice.

In interviews, I'll pose open-ended questions that probe for past relevant experience, and then sit back and listen ... really hard. ("Tell me about a situation where you had to deal with an angry customer.")

I'm not going to try to "sell" the bank. Nor will I pounce on things I have in common with the candidate. ("Wow, that's amazing! My cousin was in your high school class!")

I'm going to call prior employers for a reference, and persevere until I get through to the candidate's hands-on supervisor. I'll ask non-threatening questions, such as "Would you rehire [name of candidate]?" and "Was this a voluntary or involuntary termination?"

I'm going to pick up on any red flags that need to be explored further--especially if the answers I receive from references are inconsistent with the application or resume.

2. Make feedback more than an annual event.

I'll take the time to meet with my reports at least every two months to discuss what's going well--and what isn't. I'll provide examples. We'll identify and adjust goals as needed in a collaborative way. We'll bear in mind the SMART paradigm: goals should be Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Timed.

At the annual evaluation, there will be no surprises, and the pay raise given (or not given) will reflect an entire year's performance of all job tasks, not just a recent triumph/disaster in one area.

I will distinguish performance from conduct.

I'll accept joint responsibility for below-par performance: Is this employee in the wrong job? Does she need more training? Are my expectations realistic?

But, as long as the standards have been clearly communicated, I'll hold employees strictly accountable for misconduct such as tardiness or failure to follow procedures.

3. No favoritism.

It's human nature to like some people better than others.

However, in the workplace I will suppress my preferences and be equally accessible and even-handed to all.

I will guard against making assumptions ("X has two pre-schoolers; she won't want the additional responsibility of that promotion.").

And I'll guard against expressing opinions or using language that might be offensive, even in casual "water-cooler" conversation.

I will not lunch or socialize more with one subordinate than the others.

And I will not "friend" a subordinate on Facebook. (Regular readers know how I feel about social media.)

I will always remember that "discrimination," "harassment," and "retaliation" have broader meanings in life than they do in court. As a boss, I have considerable power over the happiness of my reports, and I will not abuse that power.

4. The buck stops here.

If an employee comes to me with a complaint--even if it's not one of my direct reports--I will never say "There's nothing I can do." Nor will I direct the employee to someone else.

I will listen carefully to what the employee says, and take factual (not evaluative) notes. (When, where, who and what; not "unbelievable!")

I will thank the employee for speaking up, and promise that the complaint will be investigated promptly, thoroughly, fairly, and discreetly.

I cannot promise complete confidentiality, but the facts of the complaint and the identity of the employee making the report will be revealed only on a "need to know" basis. I will advise the employee not to talk about the matter with co-workers as that might compromise the investigation.

I will then immediately find a partner--my boss or HR--to help me investigate and resolve the issue.

5. Termination as a last resort.

Turnover is expensive. Advertising, screening, interviewing, and training new hires costs much in time as well as money. High turnover also reflects badly on a company's reputation in the community. Employees who leave under a cloud rarely have anything good to say about their former employer.

Finally, turnover hurts my reputation as a manager. I will be judged and rewarded on my ability to nurture talent, or at least on keeping operations running smoothly.

If I'm serious about keeping Resolutions 1 through 4 above, I might be able to avoid firing anyone in 2013.

- • Hiring wisely prevents the necessity of letting someone go who should never have been hired in the first place.

- • Giving meaningful, regular feedback, and work with employees to help them improve their performance, providing appropriate rewards and opportunities to advance, they will want to stay with the bank, and we'll want to keep them.

- • Treating employees fairly and ...

- • Taking their concerns seriously creates a healthy work environment, and makes a bank a "preferred employer."

But sometimes (in cases of serious employee misconduct, or because business conditions make changes essential)

employment must be terminated. In those cases of last resort, I resolve to treat the departing employee with dignity. I will remember that, after death and divorce, loss of a job is the most traumatic life event.

I will plan the termination interview carefully with help from HR, and HR will send a representative. I will give the employee an opportunity to vent, but not to re-negotiate. I will explain the transition/severance plan, but also give the employee a written copy, as they probably won't take in the details immediately. I will express regret that this decision has been necessary, and wish the individual the best in their future endeavors.

6. The three rules of Human Resources.

In real estate sales, it's location, location, location.

In HR, it's document, document, document.

But documenting an employment action is not the same as "building a file."

Managers whom I admire follow a simple routine of noting in their calendars when they meet with employees and briefly

what was discussed. Then when it comes time to write a formal evaluation, select a candidate for promotion, or create a performance improvement plan, they have a basis to work from, other than memory.

Documents can be forms. The job description, for example: when job functions and requirements are listed under standard headings, it's easy to see if a position has been properly classified as exempt, or a candidate is qualified.

I've always been a fan of checklists (example, this month's blog). ELC's Bankers' HR ToolkitTM has them for ADA accommodation assessment, exit interviews, and worker eligibility verification, amongst other purposes. Now, if only I can muster the self-discipline to actually use them ....

2013: The Year of the Boss

I have a friend who works for the Environmental Protection Agency. He did such a good job as a scientist that he was promoted into management. Now he complains that he "can't get anything done" because his reports "keep bothering him with questions."

Being a manager is hard.

And few in community banking have received formal training on how to do it. Many just got promoted into it because they did a good job at something else. I hope these few New Year Resolutions will help us all focus on being a better boss in 2013.

About Marian Exall

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