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By IMD Professor Ginka Toegel - September 2013

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The idea that colleagues should help each other deal with problems both within and beyond the workplace was first fostered by trade unions. For a time the emphasis on community, family and caring represented far more than a peripheral concern: it was a fundamental ethos.

Of course, times change. Nowadays, with unions more likely to serve their members' interests through the negotiation of material gains, the notion of mutual aid rests largely with HR departments' use of employee assistance programmes and similar initiatives.

Yet no HR department can hope to survey and control the myriad emotions that bubble away in any modern service organisation; and certainly no HR department can anticipate and deal with the spillover of negative emotions from the home to the office or the factory floor. Enter, then, the caring boss – the manager who lends an ear, provides a shoulder to cry on, offers a kind word, listens, advises and generally tries to make good.

Intervention of this sort has attracted an abundance of research and discussion. Some argue that traditionally private aspects of life should not fall under a managerial gaze. Some contend that such apparent altruism is innately driven by the ultimate well-being of the company. Now an innovative study by IMD has added to the debate by shedding a unique light on the remarkable disparity in how emotional support is perceived by those who give it and those who receive it.

Our study focused on staff at a successful recruiting agency specialising in supplying managers for the service sector. Dozens of employees participated in interviews and questionnaires to examine whom they turned to for succor and how they felt such assistance should be viewed. Around three quarters of lower-level workers and middle managers reported getting emotional help from their superiors – and yet, crucially, not one expressed a feeling of personal debt.

And there's the rub. It seems managers tend to regard emotional support as above and beyond their responsibilities and therefore worthy of repayment in the form of a show gratitude – greater commitment, say, or enhanced loyalty – whereas employees simply deem such acts of kindness part of their superiors' duties and so have no intention of working any harder by way of saying thank-you.

A senior manager interviewed for our study summed up the situation thus: "When you do something for someone," he said, "you always kind of expect it to be reciprocated. If we go to the pub and I buy you a drink it will sort of be expected that the next time around you'll buy me one. It's in every element of our culture – except the workplace."

In other words, if a manager has helped an employee overcome some sort of personal crisis, would it be too much to ask the employee to work a little harder to satisfy a pressing target or stay a little later to meet a tricky deadline?

Managers tend to think not, but employees would disagree. As far as employees are concerned, such managers haven't done anything extraordinary. Managers have a wide-ranging responsibility to the workforce and are paid good money to do whatever it takes to keep the staff happy. So, in the employee view, managers can forget about the unpaid overtime or whatever.

Interestingly, our research shows managers and employees alike recognise that controlling negative emotions can be tremendously important within an organisation. As one interviewee observed, the risk otherwise is that the negativity will "spread like fire". A happy workforce is inherently more disposed to boost sales and profits.

Indeed, most managers cite such considerations as a principal reason for their intercessions. Moreover, even those who claim their motives are more social – "Christian spirit", for example, or "because it's the right thing to do" – concede they hope to gain something in return, possibly in the form of increased recognition from those they help and, maybe more significantly, from their own superiors.

But the thanks seldom come, which can give rise to a striking paradox. Sometimes the very negativity managers seek to reduce ends up being perpetuated not by the employees who originally harboured it but by the managers themselves, whose mounting frustration in the face of ostensible

or genuine ingratitude can lead to anxiety, a sense of helplessness and, in extreme cases, even burn-out.

Take, for instance, the manager who devoted substantial time and energy to helping an employee deal with issues outside work – only for her to resign once she finally began putting her problems behind her. As the manager recalled: “When she was turning the corner she said: ‘I’m leaving.’ My initial reaction was: ‘Oh, I feel really let down. I’ve put a lot of work into you as an individual on a personal basis.’ A couple of days later she said: ‘You don’t seem very happy for me.’ I said: ‘I am happy for you, but I feel a bit disappointed.’ She said: ‘Oh, I didn’t think about that.’”

In short, the outcomes of providing emotional support can be decidedly mixed. This being the case, maybe the lesson for all concerned is to avoid unrealistic expectations – not least in an era when so much of economic life is built on services that we perhaps should hardly be surprised when workers believe maintaining a healthy emotional climate is just another element of a boss’s remit.

The fact is that managers – and, in turn, companies and their clients – do benefit from a contented team. Superior results and productivity is essentially a given in such circumstances, even if additional displays of loyalty and commitment are not forthcoming.

It need hardly be said that some manifestation of gratitude beyond this would be nice. All things considered, however, there really is no cause for bitterness or hand-wringing if – as our research suggests is highly likely – the longed-for thank-yous remain conspicuous by their absence.

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