HOW TO MANAGE:
The 3 Skill Sets That Drive Success

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anequim™

About the Author

Gwenn Aspen is the co-founder and president of Anequim. Anequim helps property management companies be more efficient and successful through a variety of service offerings. From sourcing and managing professional remote labor from Mexico, to Rent Manager Call Center and Anequim Office Services, Anequim is able to provide game-changing results to its clients.

Gwenn is also co-host of the Bootstrappers Show, a weekly podcast available on Apple Podcasts, Spotify and YouTube. Gwenn was a founder of Wistar Group property management company in Omaha, Nebraska, which manages 1,200+ doors. She continues to serve on Wistar Group's board. Gwenn has a background in the healthcare industry and is a graduate of the University of Michigan.

In This Guide:

Introduction

What are the real-life, on-the-ground skills that make someone a good manager?

Anequim LLC started as a side hustle and grew to a large organization in a short amount of time. We began as property managers simply trying to help out our friends in the industry move their businesses forward with solutions that had worked for us. First we helped them find and employ incredibly talented teammates from Mexico, then we solved their after hours problems with our call center, and then it snowballed into doing all the back office tasks for them. In four short years it went from a team of 2 to a team of over 500 employees.

As the Anequim team has increased in size and sophistication, we realized we needed a quick-and-dirty tactical guide to help our managers and supervisors improve their management acumen. We wanted to get new managers up and running quickly and efficiently. However, we also wanted to watch out for one of the risks of growing quickly — the possibility that our carefully curated culture of **truly caring about people** could be diluted through the speed of hiring and employing masses of people. It is of the utmost importance that this central tenet of who we are as a business is infused in all areas of the company, whether from the perspective of clients or employees. There is nothing more precious to us than maintaining that culture.

We put together this guide to help us internally with these endeavors. Since we know our clients face these same challenges, we decided to share it!

This book is not the end-all, be-all of leadership or management. It won't teach anyone how to be visionary, inspirational or how to forecast. It is also not an HR manual. It is a simple, tactical guide for managing operational teams. But simple changes often make all the difference in business.

At its essence, leadership is the art of saying the hard thing, and holding people to high standards while letting them know

they are cared about personally. Leadership is managing the nuances of quality assurance through accountability. It is also ensuring that the culture and values of a company are so well infused in its employees that they are driven to act in accordance with those values when a manager isn't watching.

No manual in and of itself can accomplish this. These are traits that have to be practiced and prioritized daily. Still, this guide can help you with the on-the-ground skills that every good manager needs:

- How to create **clarity** for your team in a way that eliminates 80% of workplace drama.

- How to infuse your team with a **culture** that enables and empowers them to independently handle an off-the-wall problem the way you would want them to.

- How to master the **soft skills** that every manager needs to handle conflicts and toxic employees.

Obviously, there's a million management books out there. But I haven't found one yet that offers the concrete skills we want our own managers to practice and master. This short manual attempts to fill that gap. I hope you enjoy it!

Good Managers are Experts in Providing Clarity

When people get fired, managers often hear in the exit interview some version of this complaint: "I didn't get any feedback. I thought I was doing well, I am shocked! I did the best that I could but I never really got trained and my boss rarely talked to me about my work."

Although there is definitely another side of the story, these common complaints when someone gets fired do suggest management failures. If someone is shocked when they get fired, didn't get feedback that they were doing things wrong, was unsure how to do their job or didn't know what was expected of them, how can they be successful? If this is the case, their chances of success are inherently limited to begin with.

When a management failure ends in someone's termination, it costs companies a lot - in lost time, productivity, money and forward momentum.

Preventing Performance Issues

The simplest way to prevent these kinds of performance issues is to provide **clarity** — of the role, of the expectations and of the accountability model. People are most likely to succeed if they know:

- Who they report to
- What tasks they are responsible for
- How to complete the tasks they are responsible for
- How they will be evaluated
- When they will be accountable for their results

Creating clarity in the above areas is the easiest, simplest way to improve performance and hold people accountable with minimal

drama. When managers clarify and define expectations in the role and make sure people have the tools to succeed, it becomes easier to know who is cutting it and who is not. It becomes a metrics discussion instead of a personality or political discussion.

Five Zones Where You Need Clarity:

1: Create (and Use!) an Accountability Chart

An accountability chart makes it obvious who reports to whom, which is important. Many times the owner of a company, or the CEO thinks the chain of command is clear, but when you talk to employees their impressions are hazy.

PRO TIP: Make sure your team members have the right tools to succeed, including privileges, software, system filters, etc. These should be audited if there are performance issues. It never ceases to amaze me how often the performance problems arise from software settings not being configured correctly. Making these small corrections can be the difference between success and failure of an individual.

Let's review an example of a lack of clarity in regards to the accountability chart in the property management industry. Let's say you have a Tenant Applications Processor role. Let's say this person ostensibly reports to the owner of the company and their role is to process applications for the entire company which has three property managers. In this example, the owner of the company is infrequently in the office and typically unavailable. Let's also say that there is one property manager who has been at the company the longest and has a dominant personality. This dominant property manager doesn't believe that the processes and procedures apply to them and wants the processor to override the procedure and do things differently just for their portfolio. When their vacancy rate goes up they jump into the process and tell the processor to accept applicants who don't meet the company-wide standards, they ask the processor to bypass protocol and move their applications to the front of the line. When this happens over and over who in fact does this processor report to? Do they really report to the owner of the company or do they report to this dominant property manager? This is how the lines of accountability get crossed and turn murky.

Post an accountability chart where everyone can see it. This simple move can help people whistle-blow when necessary, and encourage them to ask questions if things are not clear or become unclear over time.

HOW TO DO ACCOUNTABILITY CHARTS RIGHT

The accountability chart should show roles, with people filling each role. We create roles first and then fill them with the right person, not the other way around. This clarifies a common organizational problem that holds companies back, creating roles to fit specific people. More on that later. Keep in mind also, it is okay to have roles listed on your accountability chart that are not currently filled. In fact we encourage that. It adds clarity.

ACCOUNTABILITY CHARTS: A REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE

I was in a weekly accountability meeting with a new manager and as we were working through the to-do items from the previous week it was obvious she was not moving forward on a number of initiatives. Instead of getting angry, I was inquisitive. I knew she was working hard and engaged at work. She was working overtime, in fact, she was working around 60-80 hours a week. Also, we had just hired someone new for her team that was supposed to solve this issue and they were trained and competent. So why didn't this new hire result in less work for her?

I asked her to pull up the accountability chart for her team in the software. As I examined it I recognized what the problem was.

Her job description had 25 responsibilities and her team members all had about five responsibilities each, one of which was "help management execute their priorities."

Our organization had grown at breakneck speed and she had not adapted her approach to the larger team she now managed. When she just had one assistant, they worked side by side collaboratively. Now she was charged with managing four people and she was having a hard time giving up responsibilities to them. Being extremely conscientious, she was worried that they would make mistakes even though they had been trained and were competent individuals. She also wasn't able to hold anyone accountable because she had not relinquished control. Additionally, she had infantilized them in the sense that they never got the satisfaction of feeling competent in their role because they were not truly responsible for anything of their own.

It was time for her to give up responsibilities to them. After all, they could handle it. Then she could spot check and follow up, making sure tasks were executed to her satisfaction but not having to do the work

for them. Would they mess up? Sure. But she would have a process in place to catch the problems before they left her department.

A few weeks later at our accountability meeting, I reviewed her accountability chart and it was fixed. She had officially given the responsibilities to each of her teammates. She was following up and spot-checking, and finally working normal work hours. One person was struggling to meet her newly assigned objectives, and now the manager could have a frank discussion with her about not meeting that objective. In turn, the employee knew she would be held accountable. If she continued to miss the mark, then the manager would have important evidence that the employee was not a good fit for the role.

Ultimately, this change took all the drama out of the role, improved her work-life balance, and helped her grow as a manager.

2: Put the Key Objectives and KPIs in Writing for Each Role

Each role needs to have key objectives and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that explain what success means in that role.

For example, let's look at a common job description for an Administrative Professional role:

Administrative Professional's Job Responsibilities:

- *Entering data into company software*
- *Invoice coding*
- *Assist with rental lease renewals*
- *Assist residents with concerns*
- *Process new prospect rental applications*
- *Verify resident information (email, phone number, place of employment, etc.)*
- *Create lease agreements in preparation of a new resident*
- *Verify that the residents have utilities in their name*
- *Conduct collection calls for residents that are past due on rent*
- *Assisting residents with maintenance issues*
- *Answer incoming calls*
- *Correspondence with residents via email*

What are the KPIs going to be for this role?
- Number of people applying vs. how many applications are processed in a week
- Receivables over 30/60 days must be below $X amount
- Maintenance issues have updates in the notes every 48 hours to demonstrate that they are being taken care of and none fall through the cracks.
- Phone ring-to-answer ratio
- Move-in error rate (move ins with errors out of total move ins). Errors including utilities turned on correctly, correct information in the system, lease agreement executed properly etc.

Of course, there is training for each of these measurables.

When you clearly outline KPIs, they give you another helpful prompt: to make sure the training process enables your employee to execute each item to your satisfaction. The job description and KPIs are your checklist for training. Ask the person for feedback with a question such as: "Do you feel that you are adequately trained on this task?" Only then can you hand off responsibility for a task with confidence that you offered descriptive clarity.

3: Put Roles (Not Specific People) on Your Accountability Chart

As discussed earlier, another common management mistake: making a role fit a person instead of making sure that a person fits a role.

We always have those loyal employees who have been with us through thick and thin and we love them! But we do our business a disservice when we create roles to fit these people instead of creating the role as it should be and then making sure that the person is a good fit for that role. As I have spoken to numerous entrepreneurs over the years, many who are in the twilight of their careers, they commonly state that their businesses could have been more successful had they not made this crucial mistake of putting the wrong people in the wrong seats.

Here is an example: We had a role that really needed to be in the office and we had a legacy employee who liked working from home. The manager was letting the legacy employee work from home because she didn't want to disappoint her and change her life — even though

the role had really changed and had new requirements. I explained to the manager that her other highly valuable employees would begin to resent this and would accuse her of favoritism if she didn't make the person fit the role instead of the role fitting the person.

Predictably, the other employees ended up feeling taken advantage of because some rules applied to them but not to this specific individual. This perceived favoritism ended up causing drama, impacting morale and ended up being time consuming and emotionally draining to fix. She ended up telling the legacy employee that things have changed and she would have to come into the office if she wanted to keep her job because she knew other people would quit if she didn't have consistency in her requirements.

4: Use a System to Hold People Accountable

Anequim uses the **EOS** system of accountability. In case you aren't familiar with the EOS system, there are some basic elements that create a cadence of accountability in any organization.

Annual meetings: These are an opportunity for company leadership to review their mission and values, and to make sure they know who they are at their core. They define the goals for the year and break up those goals by department and quarter.

Quarterly meetings: Four times a year, the leadership team assesses how they did in the previous quarter and reviews the annual goals to make sure they are on track with the mission for that year. They identify what needs to happen to move the business forward in the new quarter, then meet with the director of every department to make sure that they are clear on their objectives.

Weekly meetings: On a weekly basis, each department meets with the leadership team to discuss their KPIs, go over the quarterly goals, review their to-do list, and then discuss any issues the team is having.

Daily Huddle: These are 5 to10 minute meetings to make sure that everyone knows what is expected of them that day. These quick check-ins get people focused and on task, and allow managers to connect with teams personally to get a feel for how they are doing.

Whether you use EOS or set up your own process, be sure to have a system for recording to-do items. If someone says they will do something, write it down with a due date. The due date should be the day that you actually will check up to make sure it is done. This system works especially well if the due date is the next weekly meeting. Writing down to-do items and holding people accountable for their assignments moves your business forward and reinforces a culture of accountability.

You also need processes and procedures, written down, for employees to learn. This heads off a classic issue: someone screws something up and when you talk to them about it, they say, "Well, so-and-so told me to do it this way." When a company's culture is not rooted in clear processes and procedures that people are expected to follow, the culture becomes a game of telephone where there is no anchor for how to do things. (For more information on how to create processes and procedures see our ebook The No-Fuss Guide to SOPs.) Every time you have an issue with someone, you can easily refer back to the process or procedure. Make sure the written procedures reflect how the task or job is really done and that they make sense and are easy to follow. Always going back to the procedures and processes when giving feedback helps re-train the employee to reference the procedures and processes when they have a question. It also anchors your feedback in verifiable information which takes the emotion out of the feedback and clarifies your expectations.

When your organization is moored with clarity as a guiding management principle drama plummets. When the organization chart is clear, and roles are defined with clear KPIs people know what to expect. When people have clear processes and procedures that dictate their actions and when feedback is based on these SOPs people feel secure in their responsibilities. When things are organized and predictable it eliminates accusations of favoritism, personality conflicts and provides peace in the workplace. It also shines a spotlight on people who don't fit the culture or are in the wrong seat.

5: Don't Sugar Coat

Once you have put these clarity practices into place, there's one more to master: do not sugar coat when an employee is doing poorly. Clarity in terms of true, useful feedback is very important when an employee

is really not performing at a level required for the role. It is not helpful or nice to obscure the real problem when there clearly is an issue. Sugarcoating does no good for anyone. Be very clear if someone's lack of quality performance is threatening their job. Managers can be caring about their teammates but bosses are not friends. When you are a manager there are moments when you are not going to be a subordinate's favorite person. You have to be okay with this if you are going to be effective.

Managing can be highly emotional. It can be hard to let someone go who has not grown with the company or someone we like personally who is not a fit for the role or not meeting expectations. With improved clarity in your management, it's easier to see if they are performing or not — which really takes the emotion out of those hard decisions. The more organized and clear you can be, the more you can be confident when you have to make a hard decision.

Your Checklist for Improving Clarity:

- ✅ Create an accountability chart. Does everyone know who they report to?

- ✅ Put expectations and KPIs in writing. Does everyone have clearly defined goals? 3 to 5 key objectives and KPIs they are responsible for?

- ✅ Double check: does your accountability chart have ROLES or PEOPLE?

- ✅ Is there a clear system for having useful meetings (huddles, weekly meetings, quarterly goals, annual goals)?

- ✅ Is there a clear, consistent, company wide way to keep track of to-do items?

- ✅ Do you have a way to keep track of annual and quarterly goals and communicate these clearly to the team?

- ✅ Are there clear processes and procedures for each role so they know how things are supposed to be done and do not have to rely on the telephone game for knowledge?

- ✅ How's your track record on sugar coating? Push yourself to give kind but honest feedback to your team members.

Good Managers Foster a Generous Viewpoint

I am big on culture at Anequim. However, I'll be honest, when I was just getting started in business I didn't understand the importance of the values, the mission and the vision. These seemed like things you just talked about in a boardroom and then forgot. I mean, in our business, we did property management and we did it without screwing anyone over and by taking care of our clients. We went to kindergarten and learned to be nice, share, care and not lie. With so much going on operationally, I didn't understand how getting all philosophical was helpful to the business.

But then Anequim started really growing and there was a middle management layer. I was afraid that my number one priority, how I wanted the clients and employees to FEEL, may not be done exactly the way I wanted. Only then did I understand the extreme importance of accurately conveying our values, mission and vision for the organization. I came to the conclusion that we were nothing unless we were obsessed with our values, obsessed with our culture and aggressively pursued it at all levels of our organization every minute of every day and twice on Sunday.

I harped on my team all the time. We talked about culture constantly as we were developing our processes and procedures and policies.

Here are our values:
- **Kindness -** Professional and Respectful in all interactions
- **Diversity -** We are an inclusive company
- **Growth -** Develop others and take risks
- **Integrity -** We do what's right
- **Own the Outcome -** Own the outcome that you can be proud of. Precision in Execution

But I will say I never really felt like these words completed the picture of culture. There is SO MUCH more to it than the three to ten words you come up with in a strategic planning meeting and slap on your website.

The Finer Points of Culture

There is meeting cadence, there is how you hold people accountable, there is how you give feedback, how you show appreciation, there is how you handle a crisis, how you treat the communities you work and live in, what the holiday parties are like, how you market yourself. Does your team stay up all night gambling when you go to a conference or are they tucked in at a reasonable hour? Is your team cool or dorky? Is the company fashionable and progressive or conservative and predictable? Fast paced or more deliberate? Those "core value" words do not fully describe the things that really matter at an organization. The ways a typical organization discusses culture in a formal way is simply not good enough.

What Happens When Views of Culture Clash

This insufficiency in crafting and conveying culture to other employees really hit home for me in a recent encounter. I was emailed by an employee who I used to work with closely but since our growth over the course of the last year we now speak infrequently. She said her mother-in-law had died and she was inquiring about the bereavement policy. I went to the document where we housed the bereavement policy to find it missing, deleted! Somehow we had gone from a company with a compassionate policy to a company with no policy on the subject.

I told the employee that I would get approval from her manager for the four days we had in the document before its removal. I got the HR supervisor involved and told her how I wanted her to handle it. Then I contacted our HR manager and asked why it was missing.

I don't want to bore you with all the details. It doesn't matter. What mattered is that through the discussion with the HR manager, I realized that I was ineffective at conveying my cultural vision and values. I had failed to communicate them in a way that would trickle down into the language and policies that truly impacted the day-to-day experience of our employees and customers. That was bad because if I continued to be ineffective in this area, then the company I had obsessed over for the past four years would be missing its foundation and soul. Indeed, the whole thing could fall apart if I didn't get to the root issue of WHY and HOW I was screwing it up. It felt heavy. It was a true leadership failure on my part. My HR manager is AMAZING. I trust her. She is a good person. We figured out the immediate remedies for the issue and met the next day to talk about our real problem — my HR director didn't get our culture and how were we going to change that.

So at the meeting we hashed it out. Where were we not aligned? After all this time and attention and obsession with culture, where were we two boats passing in the night? I was shocked when we came to the core issue.

Where You Stand Depends on Where You Sit

My HR director was coming from a mental framing standpoint where 50% of people were detractors who will screw you over if given the chance. So things like a bereavement policy where it really was based on the honor system just didn't seem like a good idea because people would lie and get paid time off for nothing. I was coming from a place where 95% of people will treat you the way you treat them. Sure, 5% will try to game the system and have ill intent. But we don't make policies for that 5%; we make policies for the 95% of people who have good intentions.

As the old saying goes, where you stand depends on where you sit. In other words, some of this is related to broader country or city culture. My HR director lives in Guadalajara, Mexico, whereas I am based in Omaha, Nebraska. Her experience in life has taught her that we cannot always trust people. We have to be vigilant to protect ourselves. If we give too much, people will take advantage. It wastes time to be too touchy feely because then people contact you too much. I get this! It makes sense.

Improve Culture by Taking a Generous Viewpoint

Here is my point of view though. It is time consuming to treat people as though they are untrustworthy, because we humans rise to the occasion. If we expect people to be detractors, they will confirm our expectations. If we expect them to be trustworthy professionals of the highest integrity, they rise to that occasion.

What's more, if we are kind to people, we build goodwill so when we really need them to be patient and work with us they are patient and work with us. This reciprocity makes it easier to get through a tough spot. It is much less stressful to have a company where people believe in the general goodness of each other. There is less drama and it is an easier environment to be in because there is less burnout.

It is expensive, stressful and time consuming to expect that 50% of people will be detractors. At Anequim, we aim to take the generous view instead. But to go beyond the values-and-mission words, we are going to write all of our policies in language that is nice and kind, and in a way that shows we expect the best out of people. We are going to say we screwed up when we have, and we are going to make it right. We are going to treat people with respect and dignity and every letter we write, every email we send, every call we make will reflect this. Sure, on occasion will someone get one over us? You bet. No good deed goes unpunished and there will be moments that this philosophy will mean the company will lose money. However the benefits outweigh the costs of believing in the best of people.

Your Checklist for Putting a Generous Viewpoint Into Action

☑ **Expect to lose a few.** Being a company of integrity doesn't pay off in every instance. Don't expect it to. Act with integrity anyway.

☑ **Just like Mom told you, actions speak louder than words.** Your employees are watching you. Be careful how you speak about fellow employees and clients. Respect always.

☑ **Real leaders take the blame.** Take a standpoint of extreme ownership. Leadership is reflecting on how you screw up and owning it. It is not blaming others. Reflect on how you

communicated poorly, own poor organizational skills, own failure. But don't allow pile on effect and make sure you respect yourself.

☑ **When you have to make a policy choice or decision, think long term.** As we say at Anequim, 'long-term vision over short-term results every day'

☑ **Bring your authentic self to work.** It is okay to be human here. Make sure it is safe to do so for others.

☑ **Look for ways to see and acknowledge people's goodness.** People want to be seen as their best self. Make sure employees and clients feel this way.

☑ **Take the time to define what your culture should feel like, look like and sound like.** When you don't see those qualities in action, be bold to help your team get there. All documents internal and external, marketing materials and client interactions have to be infused with your fanatical commitment to integrity, obsession with client satisfaction and personality.

Good Managers Master the "Soft Skills"

I personally dislike the term "soft skills" to explain the interpersonal skills that are required to have healthy relationships at work. It makes them seem ornamental or optional, when in fact these skills — or the lack of them — make or break careers. It is essential that managers coach teammates in a caring and direct way.

The Origins of Conflict

Conflict generally originates from three sources in business:

- **Miscommunications or misunderstandings.** Misunderstanding is the most common cause of conflict. Example: I thought you meant I should work on this list vs. working on that list.

- **Mismatched priorities.** An unseen misalignment in priorities can lead to conflict. Example: I thought applications seemed more important than service issues, or that speed was more important than quality, etc.

- **Unclear relationship norms.** When team members have different assumptions about relationships and hierarchies, conflict is likely. Example: You come from a hierarchical business environment and move to a horizontal business culture and treat the HR people like they work for you, when in fact the new environment uses a more collaborative approach.

Most conflict at work revolves around these three themes. Now, the human mind can attribute malice to any of these given situations. In the midst of conflict, we are likely to think, "This person is a jerk and I don't like them." But if we can shift our starting point, we can actually deal with conflict in a much easier, more peaceful and more effective way.

The Most Important Conflict Resolution Tool: Curiosity

Curiosity is the tool that unlocks resolutions. When we assume that the source of conflict is something easily resolvable ("something was miscommunicated"), rather than something unchangeable ("he's a jerk"), it is easier to discuss the issue.

It takes practice to start from a place where you are assuming the best in the other person. In each episode of conflict, take a curious mindset. Seek first to understand before we assume we know what happened in a certain circumstance.

Here's an example from our business: We got a notice from the time-tracking software we were using that an employee was using another software that fakes keystrokes and mouse movements. The purpose of the faking software was for remote workers to pretend they were working. We were SURE he was cheating the system. SURE of it. I asked the HR department to talk to him, but made sure to request that they approach him with a curious mindset. "Hi, we noticed you were using this software. We were just curious, what is the purpose of it? How are you using it for your role?"

Well, I am glad that we asked first! One of this employee's tasks included a lot of copy and pasting. He was not using the software to cheat; he actually figured out a way to get it to automatically copy and paste for him while he worked on other tasks! He creatively automated his job to become more productive. Genius! Instead of a censuring conversation regarding cheating, HR had an educational conversation with him about his ingenuity.

Think about how angry, upset and disengaged this incredibly valuable employee would have been had we approached the meeting with the assumption that he had been cheating our systems. It would have been devastating. This is why all conflict should be approached

assuming the best (without being ignorant) and with a tone of curiosity. Seek first to understand.

What Happens When You Start With Hostility

Here's another real life example that shows what happens when you start with hostility instead of curiosity. I know a manager who had hired a remote professional, and he only communicated with and trained her via instant message. Miraculously, she was able to learn how to approve rental applications with remarkable efficiency and good judgment despite the subpar training. For three months she did a good job despite never speaking to her manager over the phone or video — solely via instant messenger. Then one day she asked him, "Hi! Do K-9s count as service animals?"

He saw the message and thought, "How, after all this time, does she not know that dogs can be service animals?" He immediately lost confidence in her work. Their relationship took a downwards slide for several weeks before it hit a flashpoint where she walked out on the job, irreparably severing the relationship.

I was brought in to get to the bottom of what happened. When we did the root-cause analysis and I spoke to her a revelation occurred. She did not speak English as her native language and thought the term K-9 was specific to police dogs. The application that precipitated this downward slide in their relationship was actually in regards to a police dog. She was not asking if dogs could be service animals; she was asking if police dogs counted as service animals. Now, that's a legitimate question and handled differently among property managers across the country. This relationship was ruined over a translation error!

Because so much trust was lost and each of them had behaved poorly after the initial problem, there was no way the relationship could be fixed. What a shame! If either one of them had just had the courage and vulnerability to pick up the phone and talk about it, the entire situation would have been resolved in the matter of minutes. It was a cut-and-dry misunderstanding.

The manager could have said something like, "Hi, Maria. How's it going? Look, I was curious about something that came up today. I was caught off guard when you instant messaged me about the dog being a service animal. I just want to confirm that you took the fair housing class, right?

Great. I knew you had. So what was it about this particular dog that made you question whether it would qualify as a service animal or not? OHHH it's a police dog! Oh I get it! I was confused because I was thinking you meant K-9 as a general term for dog…"

Done.

See the power of coming to conflict from a standpoint of curiosity? See the power of coming to conflict assuming the best in people? Let's assume people are smart, competent and engaged. People rise to the occasion when we treat them as though they will. Most of the time, what could turn into conflict ends up being a productive conversation.

Bonus Tip: Getting Out of Hostile Mode and Into Curious Mode

If you tend to get worked up, anxious or nervous before addressing conflict, then it may be helpful to think about all the things you like about the person before you address the issue. Maybe you like their humor, the way they speak about their spouse or the stories they tell about their kids. Remind yourself of all of their good qualities before addressing the conflict in order to set the right tone of the meeting.

Here are a few CURIOUS MODE approaches to help you get conversations going:

> "I could very well be wrong but I felt like our interaction yesterday became a little negative. I wanted to just clear the air and see if there was something I said or did that caused you to be upset with me."

> "I just wanted to make sure you and I are okay. During the conference call I sensed some irritation in your voice, and I just wanted to make sure I address it. Was there something I did that set the wrong tone?"

> "I may very well be misinterpreting it but I just wanted to talk to you about the email you sent yesterday. Was there something behind it? I know emails are easily misinterpreted but I wanted to see if there was a problem that I am missing."

Have the Hard Conversations Right Away

When we are brave and have hard discussions right when issues arise, we save ourselves time, stress, money and headache. We cut back on drama. We get the results we want. When we assume the best in people, they delight us. When we assume our problems are likely the result of a misunderstanding, mismatched priorities or an issue of relationship norms — withholding hostility and judgment on the individual — we win more often.

Be the Grown Up in the Room

As managers, our job is to keep our cool and discuss things in a professional way even when others do not. We are exemplifying adult behavior even when others are rude, emotional or cutting. The expectation is that we are the adults in the room when others are getting extremely emotional.

This does not mean we do not show emotion if someone is facing a hardship — a death in the family, a bad health diagnosis or some other personal situation. But when they are upset about the feedback regarding the work they are doing, get caught stealing unapproved overtime or sling a personal attack while getting fired, we do not digress to childish behavior along with them. We rise above it.

Handling the Prickliest Problem: Toxic Employees

One of the most difficult moments in a manager's job is determining whether someone is a toxic employee who ultimately has to be fired. Often, these employees can be high performers but have strong and sometimes negative attitudes. When it comes time to declare they have crossed the line into the zone of toxic employee, and you make the decision to fire them, it can be heart wrenching.

Many times, the person has not been able to transition to the new stage of the business. Maybe they were a fantastic lone ranger, but now that a team has cropped up around them they are not able to adjust to the new environment.

Maybe they are just plain miserable to work with because they routinely complain and nothing is ever good enough.

They are me-focused and not team-focused.

They can't get along with people who everyone else can get along with.

You as a manager have to spend too much time managing their relationships with other co-workers.

You hate working with them and so does everyone else.

Please let them go. Other people can do the work.

When we have difficult moments where we have to let people go because of poor relationship skills or because of underperformance, it should be hard. We want it to be a somber moment. People are not widgets. We need to respect the difficulty of such a task.

Your Checklist for Improving Your Soft Skills

☑ **Understand the origins of conflict.** When a conflict arises, expect to see one of these main drivers at the heart: misunderstandings, mismatched priorities or unclear relationship norms.

☑ **Practice starting with curiosity.** Rather than launching into points of friction with a hostile mindset, start by assuming the best in people. Use that generous tone to be curious about what happened.

☑ **Have the hard conversations right away.** When you tackle conflict early, it doesn't have the chance to snowball.

☑ **Be the grown up in the room.** Your team is looking to you to exhibit leadership. Once you set the tone, they are more likely to handle conflict in the same manner even when you aren't around.

☑ **Watch for (and dismiss) toxic employees.** Sometimes, even after many conversations and extra chances, an employee's attitude is just too toxic. As the manager, you have to protect the group environment, and that sometimes that means doing the hard thing and letting a toxic employee go.

Conclusion: On Your Way to Being a Better Manager

Every business and employee is more productive and happier when good management is at the core. And here's the great news — it's not actually that hard to get it right!

If these ingredients are in place, workplaces can be zones of harmony and cooperation. Here's what every good manager has definitely mastered:

Good managers make things clear. They set out clear processes and procedures. They give clear feedback. They make the reporting structure clear. They set out clear expectations and clear definitions for successful outcomes.

Good managers foster a generous viewpoint. Culture can be this or that, but as long as the foundation is a generous viewpoint — assuming that people are good and capable — it is likely to function well.

Good managers master the soft skills of addressing conflict. They handle the little day-to-day conflicts and bigger decisions, rather than letting issues and bad attitudes pile up.

You don't need to get an expensive MBA or have a ton of work experience to get these things right. In fact, they're things you can practice every day in your interactions. With practice, these skills become second nature. And we promise — they'll pay off again and again!

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