

Bringing out the best
in others



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

When I arrived home after being promoted as the CAD (Computer-aided design) Manager of our company, I had great difficulty going to sleep. It felt as though I was on top of the world and the exhilaration I felt was intensified as I looked back to the years when I first set foot in America. I was an eighteen-year-old lad then and I was very anxious to get assimilated into American society. My entire family and clan had high hopes that somehow I would make it good in a foreign land.

Fear of failure probably gave me a head start as my drive and determination to climb the corporate ladder was so strong: I immersed myself in the study of American English and culture more than my other compatriots did. I worked and studied at the same time hoping that my academic credentials and relentless drive to succeed would open doors for me. Fortunately, I was not disappointed. One after the other, the doors of opportunity began to open. I found work to finance my schooling and when I was through with my schooling I immediately found work as CAD Drafter.

Little by little, my superiors took notice of my technical and programming skills. Perhaps, over and above these skills, what really made my superiors realize that I was intent on moving up was my refusal to give up when the team seemed to have run into a blank wall. I always kept trying to figure a way out of the problem long after the others in the team had already given up. Indeed, there were a lot of instances when my plain stubbornness solved a difficult problem. Now, as a CAD Manager, I am determined that this same persistence could again one day give me another shot at a higher position.

Besides, I am convinced that I have to be particularly quick to recognize the existence of the same trait in my subordinates. I know that a worker with a

drive similar to mine would make a difference in the accomplishment of tasks. After literally burning the lines breaking the news back home through an overseas call, I sat in my apartment and asked myself, now what? I realized that having been promoted is not the end of the road. Instead, I was given another uncertain road to trek.

This time, the rules are different; the expectations are higher and the demands are also certainly harder. That very night, my elation slowly gave way to apprehension. Even then, I congratulated myself for a job well done and steeled myself for another formidable challenge to be hurdled. I took stock of the team assigned to me and wondered if I could really be an effective leader considering that I have risen from the ranks. Immediately, Mr. Tom Higen came to mind. Like me, he rose from the ranks such that he knows virtually everything about CAD.

I silently resolved that I would pattern my management style after his. Mr. Higen would be my role model and mentor. To lead the team effectively, I knew that I had to know the members of my team on a deeper level. John Maxwell (2001) writes that successful people-developers make the right assumptions about people, ask the right questions about people and gives the right assistance to people (p. 143). I felt that Mr. Tom Higen demonstrated this trait in his dealings with us. Indeed, he is a very focused worker and yet found time to bond with us, his subordinates.

It is true that in my other jobs, I also had superiors who would ask how I was doing almost every time they met me in the lobby or elevator. Yet when one is not sincere, the phony nature of the question somehow gets through and I often had the feeling that they would ask what I was doing not because they

really cared about what I was doing but because they could not find any other statement to break the ice. When Mr. Higen asked how I and my other colleagues were doing, I could immediately sense that he was not mouthing a perfunctory, one-liner as some sort of lip-service to what they call corporate bonding.

I could feel that he was sincere in asking the question and without much reservation or hesitation, I and my colleagues could discuss with him our personal problems and eventually we would move on to discussing with him work issues and difficulties. While the presence of other superiors would make us uneasy, Mr. Tom Higen's presence would be a welcome treat as we found in him an ear that was ready to listen. Realizing that I should also try to establish a strong bond with subordinates, I made it a point that in our weekly meetings, I would ensure that I would arrive at the conference room 30 minutes ahead of schedule.

While waiting for the other team members to arrive, I would ask how one's child was doing or how one was coping with a new-found hobby or sports activity. In these sessions, I was able to gauge whether a subordinate's performance is being affected by a domestic problem. Once, Matt Cavaness, a Senior CAD Specialist who is an exuberant guy suddenly became withdrawn and failed to meet a deadline twice. It is in one of these pre-conference talks that he disclosed that his 1-year-old daughter kept getting ill and the doctors could not give a final diagnosis. I remarked, " Now I see why you aren't your usual self.

I will pray that no serious illness has befallen your daughter. I think he was so touched and relieved by my statement that his concentration at work was

restored. Now, when the two of us have one-on-one discussion about production issues, we would outdo each other in saying, you are not your usual self, when we are stuck with an impasse. I would say I started to gain the trust and loyalty of Matt by that thoughtful remark. It is indeed surprising how such a seemingly insignificant gesture could pave the way to a strong bond of professionalism and friendship.

I think that in this instance, I took the step in making the right assumptions about people as John Maxwell suggested. I discovered what is valued by my team mate and knowing what he values, I use it as a means of connecting with his inner self. I began to see him in a different light and became more understanding of his previous lapses. Another positive result of my pre-conference talks with my subordinates was the fact that whenever I set a meeting or discussion, nobody would get late as what happens in other departments.

Since they all know that I always arrive at the venue 30 minutes ahead of time, they either arrive at the venue 30 minutes ahead of schedule or be at the meeting place at least 10 minutes before the sessions. They surely find it embarrassing to keep me waiting. Since I want all meetings and all outputs to be delivered on time, I must ensure that I myself demonstrate this demand in my very own work ethic. This management practice bolstered my integrity, a quality which Maxwell regards as the most important ingredient of leadership (p. 49).

Taking off from such a fruitful pre-conference talks with Matt, I also resolved to know the other members of the team in a deeper way: Gunilla and Miguel, the Senior CAD Specialists and Ramon and Olive, the Project Cad Specialists.

By knowing a lot about their personal circumstances, I believe that I could sincerely engage them in conversations that would delve on both the personal and professional aspect of the employee. I familiarized myself with the personal background of my teammates. I even took pains to memorize the number of children that my subordinates had and ensured that I could at least remember their names.

When an employee would come in to refer an issue, I would make it a point to begin with a small talk about the employee's current personal undertakings. This went on for quite some time until one of them remarked, "You're bent on becoming a Mr. Higen, aren't you?" I was dumbfounded by the man's perspicacity. With that I suddenly came to realize that perhaps my aping Mr. Higen was being counterproductive. Instead of seeing me as a superior who is as caring and concerned as Tom, I was coming across as phony and a copy-cat. Surprisingly, when I ceased trying to become a clone of Mr.

Higen, I suddenly became more relaxed in my conversations that the spontaneity and warmth of my concern as a superior showed through. My co-workers began to like me and began opening up to me as a person and as a professional. My inhibitions and my mental cues to be like Mr. Higen eventually gave way to a more relaxed and natural way of dealing with my subordinates. I began to have a very caring attitude towards my subordinates. I have begun to accept that I am who I am in my own unique way and not through the ideal of some other person.

While I am resolved to pay forward the kindness of my superior, I am also obliged to remain true to my identity. This is the only way I could safeguard

my identity as a unique individual. After having impressed my subordinates about my concern for their personal and professional welfare, I was dead-set on ensuring that they would throw in their unconditional support in the attainment of our goals. I believed that one sure way of motivating them towards this managerial objective of mine is to gather the input of each member in how to attain the goal in the best and fastest way possible.

Again, meetings were in order. The first two projects that were finished in this manner truly went fine and ahead of schedule. However, when each team member became less inhibited in voicing his opinion, we eventually came to a point when we could no longer agree as to which is the best course of action to take. As the leader, I would moderate and resolve issues and made sure that the exchange of ideas did not become a clash of personalities. It came to a point when I could no longer reconcile opinions that in one project, we were at a gridlock and time was running out.

I eventually realized that even when management principles require the input of subordinates, my role as the manager would have to be exercised with firmness and finality to avoid such impasse. Nonetheless, to soothe feelings that might have been hurt by my choice of a course of action over another, I would announce that a particular course of action is what we ought to follow as an exercise of my management prerogative but once it would not turn out to be the best, we would resort to another suggestion later.

I realized that even when inputs are sought from subordinates, I, the manager, still have the final say as to the direction that we would take. By doing this I take on accountability and responsibility if anything goes awry and

not the subordinate who offered the suggestion. Indeed, decision-making remains my call in spite of the fact that suggestions from subordinates have been solicited. I am technically proficient in all the programs related to drafting and I keep abreast of all the modern software related to CAD.

Thus, my co-workers could always count on me to give them the correct and updated technical advice. I relished being the perennial technical point person until I realized that my availability and dependability on the technical side of our work has become counter-productive. I eventually sensed that as the CAD Manager, I should be focusing on other aspects of production. In fact, I should not bother myself too much with the technical work as an employee was already assigned to specifically attend to it.

I must have made myself too available for consultation than I should that Olive kept coming to me for inputs for projects assigned to her. Her importuning consumed a considerable amount of time and having become aware of this I made sure that it somehow has to end. The next time that Olivia came for the usual technical consultation, I pretended that I was on my way out for a business lunch with a client. Throughout the day, I made sure that I could not be contacted by her. As the project was due at 5 pm on that day, Olivia was forced to study the technical material herself. In doing so, she was able to solve her problem.

I believe that after two other unsuccessful attempts to get my opinion on a project she was doing, Olivia finally resolved to finish the project all by herself. From then on, realizing that her attempts to consult me midway through a project was merely time-consuming, Olivia finally decided to do her work on her own as well. I realized that by making myself too available, I

was not leading my team. I was in fact pitching in for the work that they should have been doing in the first place. Besides, the practice has not resulted in Olivia being able to do the project all by herself.

I was teaching her but I did not intend the process to be a repeated activity as she had to be weaned from my constant supervision. I wanted her to be a self-directed or independent employee who is able to reach her goal with minimal or without supervision. This must be what Maxwell had in mind is his admonition to give the right assistance to people. The assistance I was giving Olivia at the start was not the right kind as it had the tendency to make her complacent and dependent. Looking back, I also became aware that my Transition Skill was inadequate.

Catapulted to a managerial position, I realized that I would have to go beyond the technical and programming skills and instead hone my managerial skills. I have to make sure that my technical skills are as impeccable as my managerial skills. I needed to learn fast how I could best bring about the best in my five subordinates. Due to the fact that I sometimes had to go on business trips that would take at least a couple of days of absence, I had to delegate some of my tasks. In delegating selected tasks, I would see to it that the job that is delegated is the area where the employee excels.

However, I rely on Matt to make the crucial decisions when decisions have to be made immediately. I once thought that delegating tasks is not liked by most subordinates as it would seem to be an additional burden. I learned that in delegating tasks, I have to make the other person realize that delegation is an affirmation of my trust and confidence. I would begin my

delegation spiel with the phrase, “ This is a vital process which, I believe, is best done by you. ” This statement makes the person warm up to the idea of the responsibility and he would gladly accept the task without much hesitation.

Although I do delegate certain tasks, I still ensure that I am still on top of everything by periodic calls or when absolutely needed, I would have those with delegated tasks discuss matters with me via teleconference. Going back to the admonition of Maxwell about making the right assumptions about people, I found that I have unstated assumptions about people and no matter how I try hard not to make an assumption for fear of being prejudiced, the human mind is always classifying or making categories about things and about other people. For example, I treat my two Filipino subordinates, Miguel and Ramon, the way I treat myself.

That is, as immigrants like me, I know that like me, they are in a make or break situation such that no matter how adverse the circumstances may be, they will gladly pitch in to help. With this in mind, I give them work that is at times higher or more demanding than that being done by the rest. These two Filipinos always deliver quality work on time. Indeed, people have a way of living up or down to your opinion of them (Maxwell, 147). While assigning work to these two individuals, I always ensure that I am to listen to what is going on with their families.

Aware perhaps that I always seek the best for them and their families, I am amply rewarded by their efforts to always bring out the best in themselves. Maxwell says further, “ People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care” (147). The same holds true for Matt and Gunilla. I

found that even if they are hard-pressed for time, they would normally respond with enthusiasm to a new project once I had recognized their needs both on the professional and the personal level. For Matt, mere mention of his CD rock collection would send him rattling off album titles since he knows them by heart.

I once bought a rock CD for him and he was beside himself with joy. That I should bother with my time to go looking for his type of music was such a profound joy for him. Gunilla on the other hand, loves gardening. Although I do not have much time for late night meetings, I gave her an unexpected visit. I found her busy pattering in the garden. She was ecstatic when I gave her a book about gardening. By the way she enthusiastically responded to my questions, I knew right there and then that I could count on her when it was time to get things done.

While I was quite successful with the first four team members, I was a dismal failure when it came to Olivia. It was not because I couldn't find anything that would make her respond with enthusiasm or anything that would be a common hobby at the stage of her life. Whenever her attention was called to certain lapses, she would accept it with a stony face, pout and then start working on a new task. At first I secretly resented it. However, I eventually confronted her about it and she had a litany of woes as an excuse. To ensure that she is able to produce as much as her fellow employees, I paired her off with Matt Cavaness.

Nonetheless, she would not change her habits. Before I could think of another technique to make her more productive, she transferred to another company. My experiences with these people have so far been fruitful. In

order to bring out the best in them, I need to show them my best side as well. I am a veritable role model in the department where I work. Aside from this, I must show them my utmost concern for them. By working together and at the same time valuing one another, synergy is achieved and more work is done or accomplished. REFERENCE Maxwell J. C (1971). Developing the leader within you. Nashville, Tennessee: Nelson Publishers