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THE WORKPLACE

Judgment

by Steve Johnson and Dusty White

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# judgment

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“Good judgment” is a quality highly prized by our culture. It implies that someone is able to look objectively at a situation and sum it up correctly, detecting the flaws and virtues. A significant part of a practical education in many professions is being able to “debug.” That is, an object is studied in order to detect any flaws it might have – this often involves repeated trial-and-error testing of the object. Then the defects must be found, again often by a lengthy testing process, and finally corrected.

Since technical managers typically were good technical people, one thing that gets them promoted is their ability to look at something, quickly assess its strengths and weaknesses, and root out and correct any flaws it may have.

Unfortunately, this mind-set is one of the most damaging traits a manager can have, and nearly every technical person who starts to manage needs to “unlearn” it when dealing with people. Many non-managers need to suppress this when dealing with people, as well.

To get a sense of why this is so damaging, imagine that you are the “object” being studied. Of course, when we go to the doctor, we are. Doctors spend years developing a “bedside manner” that will compensate, to some degree, for the inevitable sense of invasion we feel when we are treated as objects that need to be debugged (even though, in the medical case, this might be literally true!). We have all probably experienced a doctor or nurse who was less skilled at this and who made us feel humiliated as we were poked and prodded, half naked in a cold room on a hard table, by someone who didn't seem to care if we were alive or dead.

In the same way, managers who are seen as waiting for people to screw up (so the manager can correct them!) can quickly dry up the creativity and morale of their groups. Such groups become focused on avoiding their manager's hot buttons rather than on customers or product.

There is another real minefield concerning judgment. Most of us had to learn, at an early age, to please parents or other authority figures who were judging our actions. When a two- or three-year-old child displeases a parent, it is a big emotional deal for the kid. Few of us have developed so much security in later life that we can be judged without some ghosts of two- or three-year-old emotions stirring. We have seen people fly into rages, quit the company, or burst into tears when they felt judged by their manager, and in some cases the manager was not even consciously being judgmental.

How does judgment work? When we judge something, we construct in our mind a model for how the thing should be. Then we take in data from the world, and compare it to our model. Typically, we focus on those places where the world fails to live up to the model. Usually, if your thoughts flow this way, you will take the next step and try to “fix” the world, or whatever part of it you are judging.

What's wrong with this? One problem is that, by focusing on what is wrong, you are encouraging “away from” behavior. In other words, you are focusing on what you don't want, rather than on what you do want. If you are judging a person, your attempt to “fix it” is likely to take the form of “Thou shalt not . . .” statements. Unfortunately, telling people what not to do is de-motivating, ambiguous, and often ineffective.

Another problem with judgment is that the person being judged tends to feel less powerful. They probably don't understand the thought and emotional processes that lead

to your judgment. If they are judged, it may well bring up those early childhood feelings of being a little kid – not a powerful, resourceful state for them. If you want to empower your group and encourage their creativity and initiative, avoid judging them. Keep their focus on pleasing the customer, completing the product, or whatever. You really don't want their focus to be on your judgment!

There is also a moral and ethical issue that needs to be raised. Even though you might believe that you have the right to judge other people as human beings, you are likely to find very few others who would agree! It is time to examine your own motivation here. The trainer Ron Luyet believes that “unsolicited advice is a form of attack.” The same is true of judgment. So why are you attacking them? Even if you feel that the ends justify these means, or that your job calls on you to change their behavior, the same ends can probably be obtained without attacking the other person.

As some people begin to understand the damage their judgment causes, they may become overly nice and stop enforcing any standards in their group. They want to be “pals” to their group, and this is almost as big a danger as judgment. This is especially an issue with performance reviews, which trigger strong feelings of judging and being judged. For now, we urge you to keep a couple of things in mind.

Your job is not about good and evil. Your job as a manager is to achieve certain goals with your group, not to enter the Kingdom of Heaven (save that for your home life!). Your job is about meeting the standards required to achieve these goals. There are many reasons why people may fail to meet these standards, ranging from simple ignorance to carelessness, worry, overload, and a variety of psychological and mental conditions that they or their loved ones might be facing. You needn't care about the why. Ask how rather than why, and focus on fixing the process.

By distinguishing between an employee's worth as a human being and the specific behavior that needs correcting, you will probably learn much about the why as well as the how. Moreover, the employee will feel empowered by the experience, not diminished, and see you as a source of help rather than judgment.

Finally, if you work with a judger, nearly all judgers have a secret that they try hard to keep from you. Once you know it, it makes them much easier to work with. They judge themselves more harshly than they judge anyone else. They won't admit it, but it's universally true – it comes with the territory of judging – and when you know it's there it becomes easy to see. Being aware of this allows you to view their judging with a degree of compassion that offsets their often irritating mannerisms. You realize that their judging is an expression of their own inner conflicts, and isn't directed “personally” towards you. And you can meet their judgments and criticism with support and a positive outlook that will be a balm for their souls.