Chapter 2

Key Issues In The Manager's Relationships With Staff

Business Relationships vs. Social Relationships

There are many similarities between business and social relationships. To be in a relationship means that two people are connected in some way. Their association is organized around a set of expectations that have a real, "in the world" component, as well as an emotional component. Whether or not the two people have a common set of expectations or feel a similar type or intensity of emotional connection is significant in determining the dynamics and potential for success of that relationship.

Social and work relationships differ because they are designed to fill two very different human needs. At work, we do things together in order to earn a living and to fulfill a psychological need to feel productive. Through social relationships we create families and friendships. These relationships fulfill our need to feel connected to fellow human beings and create the social supports that help us psychologically to get through hard times and to enjoy good times.

That's the theory. However, our need for social connectedness does not automatically disappear just because we are at work. Our need to feel productive does not end just because we are at home with our family. These two needs are different, but where and how we individually meet them varies widely. I can say that work is *primarily* where people feel that they are productive human beings and that relationships with friends and family are *primarily* where they feel loved and emotionally connected. However, people and situations can be very different, so sometimes work is the focus of a person's social life; sometimes home is where a person feels most productive.

Some employees may draw very firm boundaries between "home" and "work." They will make clear distinctions between what should happen where and what are appropriate forms of expression in each of these domains. What needs they seek to satisfy through work relationships will be very different from the needs they seek to satisfy through relationships with family and non-work friends. Some staff may also view social relationships with managers very differently than with coworkers. Individual feelings about work vs. social relationships often take on a quasi-religious

"this is how it <u>must</u> be" quality. There is no arguing with such views. Managers (and coworkers) need to respect them and adjust expectations of their relationships with these staff accordingly. Although it may be frustrating to a manager who happens to like a person who has such firmly drawn boundaries, that manager needs to respect this person's world view and not push against the limits that are being set. To the extent you have a need to have a friend at work, find someone else, someone who does not draw the boundary line so firmly.

There is no real right or wrong answer to the question of whether or not to develop social relationships at work. For every example of social relationships at work contributing to poor work performance, one could cite an equal number of instances where social relationships at work were the very key to both individual and organizational success. Social relationships, particularly with peers, that are developed through work can be tremendously rewarding. These relationships can contribute significantly to effective teamwork and a work culture that approximates a close, hard-working family. On the other hand, social relationships developed at work that continue outside of work can also develop problems. This can result in strained work relationships, poor performance on the job, and low productivity for an entire work unit.

Boundaries: Work vs. Home

The truths we carry with us about work vs. home/non-work boundaries generally reflect both the values we learned from our parents growing up and the formative experiences we had growing up. As a manager, you need to understand that the people you supervise will bring a wide range of learning experiences and they will each bring their "truths" to work. Being an effective manager requires keeping an open mind to each employee's reality and figuring out how to create a functional team out of a group of people who may have very different and often competing truths.

The issue of creating boundaries between home and work life is just as applicable for managers as it is for staff. The manager is no more or less likely than a staff member to draw firm or loose boundaries between work life and home life. Feelings about these boundaries and the need for them are personal feelings, not professional feelings. There is no such thing as "professional feelings." Feelings are personal. A manager may dress

up a feeling as a professional judgment, but doing so is unprofessional. As managers, we need to be clear with ourselves that there is no right or wrong to either our staff's level of comfort with where they draw personal/work life boundaries or our own.

There also can be a fundamental mismatch between individual employees' views of social/work life boundaries and those of the organizations they work for. Organizations, like people, have differing views about where to draw the line between work and home life. The *New York Times* regularly runs a question and answer column in the business section of its Sunday paper where it interviews CEOs of highly innovative, entrepreneurial companies. A typical exchange,[1] like the one below with Tony Hsieh of Zappos.com goes like this:

> **Q.** *Can you give me an example of the value <of> the <interview> questions <you ask related to core values>?*
> **A.** Well, some of them are behavioral questions. One of our values is, "Create fun and a little weirdness." So one of our interview questions is, literally, on a scale of 1 to 10, how weird are you? If you're a 1, you're probably a little bit too strait-laced for us. If you're a 10, you might be too psychotic for us.
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> It's not so much the number; it's more seeing how candidates react to a question. Because our whole belief is that everyone is a little weird somehow, so it's really more just a fun way of saying that we really recognize and celebrate each person's individuality, and we want their true personalities to shine in the workplace environment, whether it's with coworkers or when talking with customers.
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> I think of myself less as a leader, and more of being almost an architect of an environment that enables employees to come up with their own ideas, and where employees can grow the culture and evolve it.
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> **Q.** *If you're hiring a senior executive, reporting directly to you, what kind of questions would you be asking them?*
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> **A.** It's pretty hard to interview senior executives, because they're in that position for a reason. They do many interviews themselves. It's hard to tell from an interview. So I'm not sure there's that much you can get out of the in-office

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[1]   *New York Times*, January 10, 2010. Business Section, page 2.

interview. They need the relevant skill set and experience and so on. But far more important is, are they going to be good for the culture? Is this someone we would choose to have dinner or drinks with, even if they weren't working for Zappos?

Hiring senior-level talent is very hard, it's hit or miss, and they can do a lot of damage to the culture. We've had bad experiences with that. So we have this thing called the pipeline, which is our vision for how we want to grow as a company. We're hoping five years from now the vast, vast majority of all hires will actually be entry-level, but we'll provide all the training and mentorship so that, over a five- to seven-year period, they can become a senior leader within the company. That will help protect our culture and also give all the employees a growth path professionally.

Q. *But again, if you had to hire someone from the outside for a senior job, what would you do?*

A. It's not just a single day with them and you make a decision. We'll invite them to barbecues on weekends and they bring their families, and just hang out, or go to dinner or happy hour or whatever. It's more just about trying to get a sense of who they are outside the office, I guess, and whether you feel like you can actually get to know them on a personal level or if they're very professional and standoffish.

If it's the latter, then it's probably not going to be a good fit for us because, at the end of the day, what matters most is how deep of a relationship you can develop with them. For someone who's not comfortable being themselves, that kind of puts limits on how close of a relationship you have.

In this example, the CEO is being clear that <u>his</u> personality and the corporate culture he has created is based on a very fluid and flexible boundary between work and personal life. The people who are thinking of working for Zappos.com or one of the many other young, entrepreneurial companies built in this mold need to assess their own personalities and their own comfort levels for working in this type of environment. Right or wrong about where they draw their boundary lines, these companies are clear about their expectations. The person who is not comfortable with where the line is drawn is highly likely to fail. The manager working in such a company does have the right to make hiring decisions based on the applicants personal fit with this dimension of the work environment. The company has judged this to be critical to their success.

On the other hand, other organizations have identified firm boundaries between work and personal life as critical to their success. Following orders, following a chain of command, and keeping personal feelings and home life to yourself are considered necessary for the organization's success. These two types of organizations represent different extremes. I do not have hard data to support the contention that most organizations are somewhere in the middle, but clearly workplace environments run the gamut along this continuum. It does not seem unreasonable to assume there is a bell-shaped curve that puts most organizations somewhere between highly flexible and the highly rigid. Because finding qualified candidates for certain positions can be difficult, many organizations do not see themselves as having the luxury to hire employees at one end or the other of the continuum. Given this reality, most managers need to learn how to work effectively with the staff who see the work/home life boundary issue differently. Otherwise, the manager who feels most comfortable with a flexible boundary is likely to feel that employees who draw the line less flexibly are cold and withholding. Conversely, the inflexible manager who is most comfortable with a solid boundary between work life and home life is going to see staff who draw the line differently as being intrusive and emotionally out of control.

Boundary Crossings vs. Boundary Violations

The concept of "boundary crossing" vs. "boundary violations," which psychotherapists keep in mind when thinking about their relationships with patients[2], is useful for managers to think about as well. Knowing the difference helps to clarify when our relationships with staff have veered off track and need to be corrected.

> A boundary **violation** occurs when a therapist misuses his/her power to exploit a client for the therapist's own benefit. Boundary violations usually involve exploitive business or sexual relationships. Boundary violations are always unethical and are likely to be illegal.

> Boundary **crossings** are often part of well-constructed treatment plans and, as such, they can increase therapeutic effectiveness. The following are examples of beneficial boundary crossings:

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[2] Zur, Ofer. (2004). *To Cross or Not to Cross: Do boundaries in therapy protect or harm.* Psychotherapy Bulletin, 39 (3), 27-32.

- Walking with an agoraphobic client to an open space outside the office or flying with a fear-of-flying client on an airplane

- Joining an anorexic or bulimic client for a lunch or for a family dinner

- Going for a walk with a resisting, reluctant, or irresponsive adolescent in order to break the ice.

- Going on a home visit to an ailing, bedridden or dying client

- Accompanying a fearful client to a medically crucial but dreaded medical procedure

For managers, the analogy to a therapist's boundary *violation* would include:

- Having a romantic relationship with a person the manager is supervising

- Starting a business, outside of work, with a person the manager is supervising

- Using access to company information to learn details about a staff member's personal life

- Developing a personal friendship with a staff member and providing this individual with special rewards and privileges

This last bullet is particularly tricky and illustrates the complications which occur when managers form friendships with staff. Even when such friends are not being afforded special privileges, other staff who observe these friendships are likely to perceive salary increases, job promotions, etc. as being the result of such friendships. This perception can seriously undermine the functioning of a team. When such friendships are formed, managers needs to go out of their way to be transparent about the processes and criteria that are used to reward superior performance.

Boundary crossings are much more typical in the workplace than they are in psychotherapy. Going to lunch with co-workers, playing softball after work, volunteering together on the weekend to support a local charity, etc. are all contribute to forming social bonds. Such social bonds are, for most staff, the glue that holds together relationships at work. The chit-chat on work breaks about what movies we recently saw, the social events we attended over the weekend, etc. provides a feeling of personal

connection to those we work with day in and day out. Sometimes we actually spend more hours in a week with our coworkers than with our immediate family members. It is natural for coworkers to get to know one another and form social connections. This includes managers as well as their staff.

Coworkers who do not participate in such social interactions are generally considered aloof and unfriendly. This is often a misperception. There can be many reasons why people keep themselves apart from others. Staff members have that right. They are not being hired to interact socially with their colleagues. However, if this undermines the functioning of a team, then this behavior needs to be addressed by a supervisor. Staff still have a right to chose their level of social involvement with their coworkers, but the manager has a responsibility to assure that a team is achieving results.

When it is the manager who stands apart from the group, then it will be the manager's supervisor who should be addressing the impact of this behavior. If you are supervising staff and are not comfortable with social interactions, you need to understand that this will have consequences for your team and for you, professionally. It is likely to limit your ability to advance unless you find a path that involves taking on increasing level of responsibility for technical matters as opposed to responsibility for managing people. It is quite typical in businesses that these two types of responsibility go hand in hand. This is an error and causes the workplace to be less pleasant and less productive than it otherwise would be. Managing people and managing projects are two different skill sets. As you consider your own advancement, as well as the advancement of those you supervise, it will serve you well to evaluate these factors independently and to plan accordingly.


Power and Control

The Prologue of this book opened with a scene from the life of a manger whose employees do not let him in on the joke which which are enjoying. This scene concludes with:

> *You feel like an outsider. And you are. The people who work for you and you care about, sometimes deeply, quite often do not relate to you as they would to a peer. You are "the boss" and that makes you different.*

So, what makes you different?

You write your staff's performance reviews. You either make the final decisions about their compensation or make the primary recommendations that impact their compensation. You write job references. If staff aren't doing their jobs well, it is your responsibility to intervene. If your intervention does not work, it is your responsibility to inform the problem employees that they need to work elsewhere.

That's power. You have it, they don't, or they have less of it. You have control over a very important aspect of your employee's life. You are not your employee's buddy. There is no comparable level of control that your employee has over your life. Such inequality is inherent to the manger-employee relationship. It is not inherent to a friendship; it is anathema to friendship. The most comparable unbalanced power relationship is that of a parent and child. This is the reason why manager-employee relationships are so powerfully influenced by an employee's experience with the authority figures of their youth. I will be discussing this phenomenon in the chapter on transference.
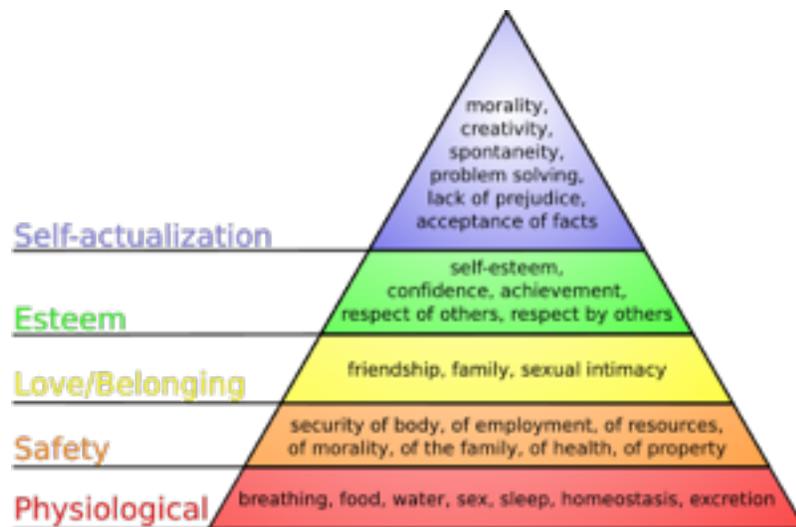
To understand why managers' power is such a major psychological factor in their relationships with staff, let's look for a moment at Maslow's hierarchy of needs.[3] What you see is that "security of employment" is ranked only one level above the core physiological processes that are needed to sustain life. Employment is the modern equivalent of primitive foraging and hunting, which are needed to sustain life. If we don't find enough calories to survive, we die, regardless of where we live or what epoch we live in. A drought can lead to the death of a herder in Somalia. However, if you lose your job, deplete your savings, and fail to find safety-net services, you could die as well living in the modern, industrialized world. This is rare, but it does happen.

In any case, we are at best only several thousand years removed from the experience of the daily search for calories being a life or death struggle. We are creatures that have evolved the ability to anticipate future difficulties. We are hardwired to scan the horizon for circumstances that might lead to a possible loss of sustenance. As members of a "civilized" society with a huge surplus of resources, the fear that motivates this activity is generally not present in our active experience or consciousness. It is an inherent, "hardwired" survival mechanism, one that is easily activated. It should therefore not come as a surprise that the relationships we have with those who control or powerfully influence our access to "calories" (employment) are tinged with this fear. For this reason there can be a certain level of anxiety that employees feel in their relationships with their supervisors. Sometimes it is on the surface where it can easily be observed; more often it lurks beneath at an unconscious level. Sometimes this fear does not exist or barely exists at all.

For example: in many of my own employment situations, I have had a certain level of anxiety that my supervisor's view of my performance was something to worry about. I worried not because I was concerned that I wasn't doing a good job, but because my employment prospects were limited. I was young and did not have a lot of work experience. My resume was thin. It really would have mattered to me if I lost my job or if my supervisor wouldn't be supportive of my desire to advance in my career. ("Move

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[3]   **Maslow's hierarchy of needs** is a theory in <u>psychology</u>, proposed by <u>Abraham Maslow</u> in his 1943 paper *A Theory of Human Motivation*,[2] which he subsequently extended to include his observations of humans' innate curiosity. The diagram used to depict this hierarchy was created by J. Finklestein for Wikepdia *under the terms of the* <u>GNU Free Documentation License</u>**.**

up the food chain" is an expression that is based on the common observation that career success is the modern equivalent of the quest for ever greater and more reliable source of calories.) However, later in my career, beyond my psychological need to have a person in authority see me as capable, I became less and less concerned about losing my job. I had a great resume. I was good at what I did. It was looking for work in a strong job market. My thought was, "go ahead, fire me! I can get another job, most likely one that is better and pays more than this one." This was not a position of fear. With this level of confidence (perhaps grandiose at times), the feelings I had towards my supervisor were quite different than earlier in my career. I felt much more like we were peers and operating on the same level. With the power differential significantly diminished in my mind, the low-level anxiety that seemed inherent to earlier relationships with supervisors went away.

If staff have little to fear, power is not going to be an issue in their relationships with their managers. In these situations, the manager and the employee, are in psychological terms, equals. In such situations it is quite possible that the two people can and will develop friendships if they have common interests and values. Some of the most meaningful and enduring friendships my wife and I each developed over the years have originated in the workplace. These friendships were with employees we supervised as well as the "bosses" we reported to. The common denominator in these situations was that our friendships developed only in the context of the person being supervised feeling that his or her boss was an equal.

Secrecy

It is necessary for managers to keep some of what they know about their businesses to themselves. They could not do their jobs effectively or ethically if they shared all information with those who worked for them. For example, in most employment situations the compensation of individual employees is not openly shared by managers with all staff. Workers generally do not want their peers to know what they earn. What is said about compensation between supervisor and supervisee is confidential.

Information about the organization's long-term plans for growth or, more importantly, plans for cut backs, are another matter. Cutbacks threaten survival. Information pertaining to survival is highly prized and the withholding of such information is a

perfect example of the power differential between manager and employee. Keeping such information private is naturally experienced by employees as "secrecy." The only comparable relationships most of us have had in our lives where others regularly withheld information from us is our relationship with our parents when we were growing up. Parents do not talk to their kids about many issues and concerns, even in families with very open lines of communication. Some topics are simply too complicated for young children to understand. Some parental concerns can easily be experienced as overwhelming if openly expressed to children. For example, when a parent is about to lose a job or the parents are heading towards a divorce, such concerns should only be shared with children in a very carefully thought-out manner. Eventually, the children will realize that their parents have known about these situations for a long time and that information has been withheld from them. They may or may not agree that this was a good idea. However, it was not their parent's responsibility to consult with their kids before making such decisions. It was their call, their judgment about how to best balance protecting their children with having open and honest communication.

To the extent withholding information from employees resonates with their childhood experiences, secrecy will be experienced as a major issue. For such staff, distrust will be an omnipresent element of their relationships with their managers. It is unrealistic for managers to expect that just because they act differently than their staff members' parents that this difference will provide a corrective emotional experience, an experience that leads to trust replacing suspicion. Certainly this is possible, but it is not likely; we fool ourselves and set the stage for disappointment and anger when we expect otherwise. Managers have real power in the real world, but relatively little power to overcome the deeply seated interpersonal patterns of behavior, experiences, and expectations of their staff.

Is Friendship Possible?

As discussed above, friendship is possible if there is no significant power differential between manager and staff. The question to ask yourself as a manager is whether a friendship is likely to get in the way of or augment a work relationship. Sometimes you can anticipate what the answer to this question will be before you embark on developing such a relationship; sometimes you can't. When this is not possible, you

need to keep vigilant as the relationship develops. However, even if you are diligent, relationships have a life of their own. It is quite possible you will find this friendship to be more important to you than your relationship at work. Then what? Relationships can get complicated and messy quickly. Managers can find themselves in situations where they need to let employees go or make a promotional decision. Employees are faced with their employer relying on them to make objective decisions, yet the relationships they have developed outside of work may preclude such objectivity. This is the kind of risk managers need to weigh when they consider having friendships with the staff they supervise.

Managers also need to keep in mind that it takes two to tango. Developing a social relationship with staff must be by mutual consent. Staff must be given the absolute power to say "no." If the manager is interested in having a social relationship with an employee and the employee is not interested, that needs to be the end of it. That is the employee's right. An employer does have the right to expect that employees will be sociable at work (i.e., get along with others, work as a cooperative member of a team, etc.), but not to develop social relationships either with coworkers or managers. We come to work….to work. Hopefully the work is enjoyable, but in the end, for most people, the core reasons we come to work are to have a stable source of income and to have an experience of being productive, not to make friends or to feel less lonely.

Romantic and Sexual Relationships

We also don't come to work to mate! According to TV depictions of the workplace, this would appear to be a minority view. In the TV workplace you would be odd or ugly if you were not having sex with your boss or coworkers.

Such shows glamorize and minimize a series of very serious decisions that are fraught with peril. Unfortunately for too many managers and too many staff, serious and objective decision making loses out to the heat of the moment. Lust and romantic love, like drugs, have a way of reducing our critical thinking capacity. On some level we know we are asking for trouble, but we ignore that knowledge and find half-baked ideas and observations to support doing what feels good. We think that we will know better if we find ourselves in these situations and that we will act in our long-term

interests. We most likely think that we will never be in these situations to begin with because we leave our sexual selves at the door when we come to work.

Not true. Look at Maslow's hierarchy again. What is just as basic a need as securing food and shelter? Sex. Just as we are wired to attend with great concern to our safety and survival needs, we are just as wired to respond to sexual stimuli. We are all sexual beings. Our inherent sexuality does not disappear just because we are at work or at church. It is less likely that our sexuality will find expression at work or at church because we tell ourselves, "Not here, it's not appropriate." These messages we give ourselves help to keep our feelings temporarily in check, but our feelings do not go away.

Having sexual feelings towards the people around you, including the people you work with, just means that you are human and that you are alive. Acting on these feelings is another matter. Most sexual feelings come and go, along with the fantasies that accompany these feelings. However, if these feelings and fantasies become intense or persistent, you are likely to be powerfully drawn to act out your feelings. If these feelings are towards a coworker, someone on your same level, the problems of having a romantic and work relationship are not insurmountable. If it is a manager who is having such feelings towards a supervisee, the problems this creates are severe and can only be remedied by either ending the work relationship or ending the romantic relationship. To do otherwise is to shirk your responsibilities as a manager and most likely to cause harm to the person you manage and have possibly come to love. Managers can not objectively make decisions about salary increases or layoffs when a person under consideration is someone they are sleeping with or even dating. It is impossible to wake up in the morning and supervise the same person you were sleeping with two hours earlier and think you are going to be objective. To manage under such circumstances will inevitably be destructive. Even if the manager is "just" dating, both parties are generally trying to impress each other. Consciously or unconsciously, if you are managing under these set of circumstances you are likely to show favor to the staff member you are dating. If you are turned down as a romantic interest, you are likely to avoid or express your hurt feelings in the workplace in some manner or form. Neither outcome is helpful or appropriate.

Having a crush on someone you manage can be just as destructive as having a real sexual or romantic relationship with that person. You think having a crush is not going

to hurt you or the person you manage because the relationship is just in your head. You are wrong. A fantasy-based relationship will distort how you relate to the person you are infatuated with in a very powerful manner. Like the person who is acting out their feelings, you too will come up with all sorts of rationalizations for why your feelings are not destructive. You will mostly like create "better" rationalizations than the manager having a real relationship because you will be telling yourself, "my supervisee doesn't even know how I feel, what harm could I be doing?"

Lots. You will not be giving your crush the corrective feedback he or she needs to be doing their job properly. You will be giving the person favors that others don't get and this will undermine your team. You are likely to offer career advancement options that aren't being offered to others. This is an ethical failure and it is a failure to do the job you were hired to do. If you really think you love the person you are managing, have the courage to make the relationship real and do so ethically and responsibly in the context of a purely social relationship.

If you develop romantic feelings towards someone you manage, you have three primary options:

- Option 1: end your supervision of that person and arrange for the person to be supervised by someone else.

- Option 2: if an option to change supervisors does not exist in your organization, and this relationship is really important to both of you, then one of you needs to quit your job and work somewhere else.

- Option 3: end the sexual/romantic relationship. This is much easier said than done. Turning off intense sexual feelings towards another person is very difficult. You can give it a time-limited try. If you are not successful, seek the help of a counselor, a professional you can confide in to assist you in working through your feelings, fantasies, and impulses.

Conflict

Conflict is a normal part of all relationships. What is different about conflict in the context of the manager-staff relationship is the power differential inherent in this relationship. It can result in staff making efforts to minimize conflict with their

managers to a much greater extent than they would in their peer relationships. Statements or positions that they might object to if made by their peers are less likely to be objected to with you. The key decision point for staff is their assessment of whether or not there will be a cost to be paid for expressing disagreement.

It is your job as their supervisor to make it clear, not just in words, but in deeds, that you welcome hearing different points of view and that you appreciate hearing from staff when you have acted in a way that they have perceived as offensive, hurtful, or unhelpful. Your disapproval should be communicated to staff who are <u>not</u> bringing conflict out in the open for discussion. To the extent their differing points of view are expressed, you and the organization you both work for are the beneficiaries.

The manager's point of view is inevitably going to be wrong a certain percentage of the time. Even when the manager is not entirely "wrong," a staff's point of view is going to be more accurate, more complete, more helpful, more creative, etc. a certain percentage of the time. What matters is that the team you lead accomplishes the work you have been assigned to do. A manager's performance is judged by the accomplishment of those goals, not whether the goals were accomplished because the manager was the person with the best ideas. The manager's job is similar to that of an orchestra conductor: to get the best performance possible from the musicians. The conductor does not need to be able to play each instrument better than anyone else.

Because of the power differential, it can often take extra effort on your part to convince your staff that you welcome their contrary points of view. When negative transference is present (a concept that merits its own chapter), this may be very difficult or impossible to accomplish. Even staff who have not had particularly onerous experiences with authority figures growing up may still lack the confidence or the skills to communicate effectively in these situations. They will need coaching and modeling, not just encouragement.

A common problem staff have with speaking up is their difficulty in distinguishing a challenge to your ideas from a challenge to your authority. The two are often so inextricably bound together in their minds that they don't see the difference. Perhaps you don't either, and if you don't, you can't teach them. Furthermore, if you don't understand the difference or do not feel comfortable being challenged, your staff are going to pick up on this. It will be their assessment that it is a fool's errand to challenge

your ideas. From their experiences with you they will learn that no matter how thoughtfully and articulately they challenge your ideas or point of view, you are going to translate this communication into a challenge to your authority. You are going to make it an "ego thing."

Assuming you do not have a personal problem with staff expressing disagreement, the simplest way to teach and encourage this is through modeling. If you have a boss, it will be helpful for your staff to see and hear how you challenge your boss' ideas and viewpoints and how he or she responds to you. These are "teachable moments." Sometimes you can plan for them; most often you can not. It therefore behooves you to remove barriers, if they exist, that inhibit you and your boss from openly and creatively expressing disagreement. Your staff will be watching very closely. It will be very difficult for you to have your staff open up with you, if they see that you can not do this with your own boss or if they do not see a positive result from your actions. Even when the outcomes of such interactions are not entirely positive, your staff can still have a positive learning experience. They will see that you made a good faith and intelligent effort to express yourself and that you emerged from the conflict with your integrity and employment still intact.

In my most recent full time management position, I had five "bosses." I report to a Governing Board composed of five county commissioners. The Governing Board only meets four times a year. More often than not, my staff attend these meetings and have an opportunity to observe me taking positions that differ from those of some of the Board members. Sometimes I come around to their points of view and sometimes they come around to mine. My staff have observed the times that I have gotten emotionally caught up in the debate and have taken things personally. It is clear that when I have done this, I have not been particularly effective. Frequently, I realize this before the discussion is over, so my staff have the chance to observe how I recognize my mistake and reverse course. Certainly, I would prefer not to have such modeling opportunities, but there is a silver lining to these mistakes: my staff have the opportunity to see me model some very important skills. It is not easy to reflect on one's experience in the "heat of battle," then back down and/or reverse course when the situation warrants. I don't claim to have a perfect record in this area, but I am successful often enough that a tone and set of expectations is established. This is how organizational culture is created, example by example.

A barometer of staff's comfort level with speaking their minds is whether or not you are occasionally the recipient of light-hearted teasing. People working in groups will do this with one another to inject some fun into their interactions and to bond. The ability to "take one" and "give one" is a sign of trust and inclusion. Watch how adolescents interact and you will see that this is almost a non-stop mode of interaction. Adults do this too, but to a lesser extent. The boss should not expect to be included in much of this. The boss by definition is an outsider, but not 100 percent of the time. Just the other day, after I exaggerated a point to get people's attention during a meeting, a relatively new employee remarked to the group, "Oh, he's full of it." When the meeting was over I went up to her and thanked her for feeling comfortable enough with me to call me out and make fun of me. It is well worth the manager's time to consciously make the effort to reinforce these minor expressions of what could be perceived as challenges to authority. It makes it clear that you can handle them and sets the stage for staff to express themselves openly and honestly when more is at stake.

It is a big responsibility to be a manager. The pressure is on you to deliver. If you insist on going it alone, the odds of your success are diminished. The odds of your success go way up if you lead a team that feels that they have the ability to point out ideas that might be better than yours and to give you feedback when you are not being effective. When this occurs, it actually takes a lot of pressure off of you. The group has taken ownership of *their* goals. In this context, you are included. You are not outside looking in. You are not alone.

Cultural Differences

The importance of recognizing cultural diversity in the workplace has grown exponentially over the past 15 years. It is now a general expectation that organizations will provide diversity training for their employees and will hold staff and management accountable to the organization's policy on "cultural diversity" or "cultural competency." Much has been written about this topic.[4] I will not attempt to summarize

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[4]   Gordon, J.; Whelan-Berry, K, Hamilton, E. The relationship among work-family conflict and enhancement, organizational work-family culture, and work outcomes for older working women. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, Vol 12(4), Oct 2007.

Fineman, S., (2008). *The Emotional Organization: Passions and Power.* Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

a field in just a few paragraphs; it is a field unto itself. I will assume that the reader has received some training in this area. My focus will be on aspects of this field that pertain directly to the subject of this book: the psychological aspects of cultural differences as they pertain to the job of being a manager.

To manage is to direct. To direct is to communicate. To communicate is to send and receive information. Whether the sending and receiving of information is through verbal or non-verbal expression or through various mediums such as emails or video, that information has two parts: foreground and background. The foreground: the words and non-verbal signals that communicate specific content. For example:

> Staff Member: *It really ticked me off when you left for vacation and didn't even say goodbye. When you came back you never said anything about your trip or said anything besides 'good morning.' We've worked 10 feet from each other for over five years! And that's all you have to say to me?*

The background is the set of culturally determined expectations we have about human behavior and human interactions.

> Staff Expectations: *It is rude to leave for vacation without acknowledging the separation.*
> Manager Expectations: *Making a big deal of stuff like that just makes people anxious or sad. It's better just to come and go quietly.*

We all tend to hear just the foreground and take the background for granted. The background expectations are assumed, like the air we breathe. We learn the core of these expectations in our families growing up. Our families' expectations are connected to expanding concentric circles of related groups within which we are embedded. In the example above staff and manager experienced the same event quite differently. This difference has to do with what they learned growing up about how one is "supposed" to respond to comings and goings. Culture-specific messages about social norms of behavior are very powerful. Kids are taught to be "good" and to not behave "badly." When we see others violate these rules, we react with strong emotions. Seemingly small events can trigger major feelings and major conflict.

For example, I live in a small city in Oregon that has its own set of expectations, but I grew up in a Jewish family in the suburbs of New York. My parents were second - generation Americans; my father was the only child (in a family of 12 children) who

went to college. The expectations I learned about human interactions from my family and these wider associated groupings far outweigh the expectations of the region I live in now and the groups of people I associate with here. I can't help but experience my interactions today through the prism of engrained expectations. I find many seemingly nice people around me to be rude and I am sure they find this Jewish New Yorker to be bad-mannered and disrespectful at times as well.

As a manager, you need to be aware of the possibilities for miscommunication based on the cultural differences between you and your staff. To illustrate this point I will provide an example from my own experience, one that was significant and painful and, hopefully, instructive.

I own a reprint of a famous Norman Rockwell painting that I have hung on the wall of a number of offices where I have worked. It is titled, "The Problem We All Live With." Rockwell created it in 1964 for "Look" magazine. It depicts Ruby Bridges, an eight-year-old black girl, being escorted to a New Orleans school by four federal marshals. To me, it "clearly" symbolizes bravery and courage and the better part of the American spirit that values equality and justice for all and the willingness to fight for these values. I keep it at work to remind me of these values and to communicate non-verbally to my associates that these are core values in the work we do.

Needless to say, I was shocked and surprised when my supervisor came to me and told me that my painting had offended a number of African American employees in our company. I could not have imagined in a million years that this painting (and the person who hung it on his wall) would be considered culturally insensitive, particularly by African Americans. I offered to meet with these employees who did not work in my department, but regularly passed by my office. They did not feel the need or have the desire to do this. They wanted the painting taken down and were willing to file a grievance to make this happen if I did not comply with their request. I felt like Ruby, a victim of injustice, but unlike Ruby, too afraid to fight. My boss told me that making an issue of this would be a "career limiting move."

It just seemed so wrong! Yes, I could see that the word "nigger" was scrawled across the wall that Ruby Bridges was walking in front of, but this just made her all the braver. Wasn't it obvious that this painting was a tribute to all the black people who fought

injustice? She was a hero. She was standing up to the bigots. This painting honored diversity. Didn't everyone see that?

It took many months for me to see that there were no right answers to my questions. It was the questions I was asking that were missing the point. The complaint against me was not that I was a bigot. Not at all. No one thought I was calling black people by the epithet in the painting. The point of the complaint was that people – all people – come to a place of employment to work, not to be presented with daily reminders of the horrors of racism or the horrors of some other equally ghastly aspect of their history. Yes, this battle for equality was very important to these black colleagues. Yes, they could see that this painting honored those who fought its battles. However, they were being given no choice but to think about this topic by the presence of my painting. They certainly believed it was important to think about racism – but at a time and place of THEIR choosing. My painting, and my insistence that it be in my office in full view took away their choice. The very qualities that made this such a great, dramatic painting coerced anyone who saw it to turn their attention to a painful matter.

As a manager, you need to be thinking about the realm of possibilities. If you can foresee a reasonable likelihood that people of differing cultural backgrounds could be confused or offended by a particular communication or act, then you need to think about modifying your communication to minimize that possibility. As a manager, you can anticipate that such miscommunications are going to occur among your staff and that sometimes your staff are not going to be able to straighten out these miscommunications themselves. They will need your assistance and leadership.