

## AT WORK

# Managers must balance compassion, leadership



Authors Pat Heim, left, and Susan Murphy

Unlike men, women often communicate with facial expressions or gestures — a smile, a tilt or nod of the head.

In addition, women need to emphasize cooperation in order to have healthy conflict. There are five ways to do this: respect the opposition; value the relationship with those who have opposing viewpoints; recognize that you need the opposition to implement a desired outcome; support an opponent's self-esteem and sense of power; and support your own self-esteem and sense of power.

Some businesses already have devised ways to foster better female relationships by calling attention to violations of the authors' power rule, Heim and Murphy say. In fact, they often call attention to violations in their own predominantly female firms.

"If we have to violate it — we're stuck at the airport, it's 10 minutes before the plane leaves, and we must dole out 12 assignments over the phone — we often preface our requests with, 'Now I'm going to have to violate the power dead-even rule, but ...'" the authors note in their book.

With women on their way to owning nearly half of American businesses, Heim and Murphy say it's time women know the truth about the interactions they have with one another. They remain convinced that women who read their book will not only identify with what's said, but will be able to prevent conflicts from spiraling out of control.

"I see more support of women by women now," Heim said. "They're saying, 'Instead of backbiting, let's get together.'"

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The horrendous events of Sept. 11 have placed many managers in the difficult position of watching the focus and productivity in their units decline as their employees deal with emotional events that cannot be constrained to off-work time. Along with our feelings of anger and sadness about the events in New York and outside Washington, mental health professionals say, many of us are exacerbating our low feelings by re-experiencing some part of other sad events in our lives.

Veteran managers recognize the similarity between the challenge they face as a result of the Sept. 11 tragedy and other situations where employee personal problems have a significant impact on the work environment. They carefully consider how to be compassionate with the people in their unit and, at the same time, how to implement their responsibility for giving leadership to their group.

Leaders with good people skills are sensitive to their employees' feelings and approach the situation with patience and empathy. They are confident that most of their subordinates will be resilient and that the performance decline will be temporary.

Managers may notice, however, that some subordinates don't bounce back from personal problems as expected and that their subpar performance diminishes the unit's productivity and morale.

Persistent employee problems require managerial action in spite of our all-too-human tendency to avoid confrontation or hope that problems will go away of their own accord. A manager's failure to act appropriately, and in a timely manner, is a breach of his responsibility to the organization and is almost always unfair to other employees who are exercising the self-control necessary to maintain their work commitments.

Managers perform their task best when they carefully set and consistently enforce standards for work behavior and productivity that hold subordinates accountable. Whatever the source of an employee's personal problem, the manager has a right to expect that acceptable work habits and performance standards will be maintained.

Managers are not therapists; they cannot become involved in counseling employees in a way that compromises objectivity. The good ones draw a line between listening respectfully to an employee's circumstances and engaging in discussions of personal matters beyond the scope of the supervisory relationship. Experienced managers refrain from suggesting solutions for the employee to implement unless the rapport between the two is exceptional.

When faced with a persistent problem, communication with the employee will be the necessary first step. The manager will often not know — or not

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know enough — about the employee's circumstances and will need to become informed before deciding how to intervene. Meeting in a private setting and expressing a desire to understand the employee's circumstances is a good starting point.

Managers should be prepared for the employee to deny the existence of a problem. Some will argue and reject the manager's evaluation of the problematic work situation.

While managers should use their judgment about the level of distress being expressed by the employee, specialists in human resources can help by giving a second opinion. Employees who are distressed will benefit from interventions that should be worked out with trained professional advisers acting under guidance and authorization from executives and legal counsel.

Once the manager has a basic understanding of the employee's situation, the manager should state her expectations clearly, along with the specific ways that an employee is failing to meet them. Employees are encouraged to take advantage of measures available in company policies, such as voluntarily seeking counseling through an employee assistance plan or using authorized leave, to bring themselves to an acceptable performance level.

Finally, depending upon the severity of the problems, the manager will outline potential consequences if the employee cannot renew his work focus and return to an acceptable performance level.

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## JOB SHARING

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## SUNDAY

DAVID COHEN, author of "One Year Off: Leaving It All Behind for a Round-the-World Journey," plus call-in questions about your work life, radio show "Work With Marty Nemko," 11 a.m., KALW 91.7 FM.

## THURSDAY

HOW TO TURN A GREAT IDEA INTO A MILLION-DOLLAR PRODUCT, 6:30 p.m., Learning Annex, 291 Geary St., San Francisco, \$34 for members; \$49 for non-members. Details: (415) 788-5500.