

## THE GOLDEN RULE AS A MANAGEMENT PHILOSOPHY

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### ABSTRACT

Many supervisors take as their management philosophy the Golden Rule: do unto others as you would have others do unto you. This approach implies that supervisors use themselves as models in understanding how to manage others. A corollary is that managers should treat employees the way managers themselves wish to be treated. Often, however, employees want to be understood as unique individuals and as such, they respond to different management methods than managers might like. This is because what one person appreciates, another may not. Supervisors must realize that what works to motivate one employee may not necessarily work well with every employee. Examples are provided from a variety of situations that illustrate problems using the Golden Rule as management philosophy. Alternatives are offered.

### I. INTRODUCTION

An old oriental fable vividly dramatizes the negative consequences of following the Golden Rule, treating others as we would like to be treated, and is an appropriate metaphor for the kinds of problems that can arise when supervisors strictly follow this well-intended axiom: "Once upon a time, there was a great flood; and involved in this flood were two creatures, a monkey and a fish. The monkey, being agile and experienced, was lucky enough to scramble up a tree and escape the raging waters. As he looked down from his safe perch, he saw the poor fish struggling against the swift current. With the very best of intentions, he reached down and lifted the fish from the water. The result was inevitable" (Adams, 1969, p. 22).

Just as the monkey in the story assumed that the fish's needs were similar to his own and behaved accordingly, so do many managers assume that their employees think, feel, and want to be treated as they do. However, difficulties arise when we use ourselves to determine how to treat others (Perreault, 1996). The problem is when other's perspectives are assumed rather than assessed.

## II. WHAT CAN GO WRONG

How can such an ingrained, common sense adage, one of the oldest ethical maxims, not be the best way to manage people? The reality is that what one employee appreciates, another may despise. This is because most of our preferences in life are learned and are highly individualized (Zimbardo & Weber, 1994), including how we like to be treated by supervisors.

The tendency to assume that others share our opinions, feelings, and behavior is called the *false consensus effect* by social psychologists and is considered a fundamental bias in our thinking about other people (Dawes, 1989). We commonly think that others hold similar political opinions, find the same movies amusing, or believe that everyone feels baseball or football is the distinctive American game. Individuals tend to overestimate the proportion of other people who agree with their attitudes about drugs, abortion, seat belt use, university policies, politics, and even Ritz crackers (Suls, Wan, & Sanders, 1988). In other words, we assume that people agree with us to a greater extent than they actually do across a wide variety of issues. The adage, "The thief thinks everyone else is a thief," aptly applies.

The following are several areas where "doing unto others as we would have them do unto us" may not be an effective strategy and where tailoring our approach to others based on *their* needs and perceptions is generally more appropriate.

Rewards. The range of potential differences between ourselves and the people we manage can be great. For example, consider rewards that we might provide for employees. Managers often assume that what rewards them likewise will reward employees. A manager may reward a worker with higher pay when the worker really wants prestige, recognition, or more vacation time. Many plant managers have taken a top performer and spouse to an extravagant dinner when that was the farthest thing from that particular couple's desire. They may well have preferred beer and pizza or dinner alone! Of course, the opposite mistake is also made when we assume that because of certain background factors a couple would prefer beer and pizza when in fact they want to go to a fancy restaurant. Similarly, many of us have heard someone say, "Everybody likes public recognition." The fact is that in research Daniels (1994) has done, most employees say they do not like it. They give various reasons, but most of those reasons center on concern about what peers might think about them. The effective manager or supervisor knows which people like public recognition and which do not and decides on a plan of action accordingly.

Diversity. Diversity is a second issue that brings the Golden Rule into question. Demographic changes have created more varied societies. In the U. S. workforce these shifts and the impact of the civil-rights and follow-on movements have generated more and more workers with differing value systems and backgrounds. Companies are initiating numerous programs geared toward enhancing appreciation of diversity. Valuing diversity means being responsive to a wide range of people unlike oneself. Included is any number of distinctions such as: race, gender, class, native language, national origin, physical ability, age, sexual orientation, religion, professional experience, personal preferences, and work styles. Valuing diversity involves going beyond the Golden Rule (Carnevale & Stone, 1994). It requires one being receiver-centered rather than self-centered with regard to ones' actions. Valuing diversity involves treating others as *they* wish to be treated.

Differences in perceptions of harassment. There is virtually no doubt about the fact that certain behaviors constitute sexual harassment. For example, "quid pro quo" behaviors (e.g. a supervisor telling a subordinate that the person either performs a sexual favor or is terminated) is clearly sexual harassment. Nevertheless, where the behaviors are not so blatant and may still constitute a sexually hostile environment, the question of defining how a reasonable person would interpret behavior becomes much more important.

One problem is that there are gender-based differences in the way men and women view various behaviors. Based on the literature, for instance, females are much more likely than males to report that they experienced some form of unwelcome sexual attention and to define more social-sexual behaviors as sexual harassment than do males (Gutek, 1989). Similarly, males are less likely to attribute responsibility for sexual harassment to the alleged harasser than are females, and men are more likely to place blame on the female target than are females. Conversely, females have been found to assign responsibility for sexual harassment to the harasser.

Supervisors must understand that it is the perceptions of the alleged harassed individual that will be meaningful in a courtroom. A comment that a male supervisor may perceive as merely complimentary might be perceived by a female as uncomfortable or insulting and create the basis for a sexual harassment charge. Therefore, it is essential to keep in mind the fact that it is the perceptions of the person on the receiving end, not merely the intentions of the sender, which will ultimately determine whether the behavior is unwelcome. Again, it can be seen that failure to take into account the orientation of others may have an unfortunate impact and that doing to others as we would have them do to

us is an improper managerial model.

### III. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Productive management strategy is not a matter of being aware of our own needs and responding to employees based on them, simply because we assume that others want to be treated like us. Instead, productivity is brought about by being sensitive to others' perceptions, wants, and priorities, then treating them in accordance with these outlooks. Generally, supervisors will be most effective when they take into account the perspectives and preferences of their subordinates and not use themselves as models in managing others.

There are, however, instances when the Golden Rule is definitely useful (e.g., when a similarity of interests exists between the user of the Golden Rule and the receiver of the action). But, in most cases, those who wish to maximize their effectiveness would be well advised to be cautious in its use as a managerial credo. The following suggestions may be helpful: 1) Be continuously aware of your assumptions about people and your interactions with them. This is a lifelong process, not an end to be achieved, then forgotten about. Do you assume the best about people, or the worst? People will perform up or down to our expectations. 2) Be aware that your views, preferences, and needs are not necessarily shared by others. This seems obvious, but people forget. The cliché, "What you see depends upon where you stand," is appropriate since everyone sees the world from their own unique points of view. Remember, everyone takes a different path to get to their particular vantage points. 3) Learn as much as you can about individual differences and preferences. These include race, culture, personality, family background, gender, religion, and nationality. The more you know about differences the better you will be able to see beyond your own vantage point. Accumulating knowledge in this area is the first step. Appreciating and valuing differences come next.

Use the Golden Rule cautiously to check whether you might be rationalizing when it comes to your own decisions. You may want to ask yourself periodically, "If the situation were reversed, how would I feel and respond?" To avoid the problem of projecting your own preferences when responding to this question, also ask yourself, "Is this what the other person wants?" and "How do I know?"

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