

Leadership instalments

Favouritism & Fairness

By Dan Gaynor

ABOUT A MONTH OR SO AGO, I BOARDED AN AIRPLANE for the return trip from Toronto and a young woman took the seat next to me. We introduced each other and I learned that she worked on a fairly large accounting team as part of a large organization. When she asked about my work, I told her I had my own business as a teacher and consultant in the field of leadership practice and building high performance teams.

After a few minutes, she began to tell me about her concerns at work – then she asked the question that had clearly been weighing on her mind, the one she had clearly been thinking about for a while. She asked me what I thought about the issue of favouritism at work. My first thought, the one many of us would have had, was that favouritism is wrong, it's unfair and it's discouraging. I held my answer though and asked her to tell me a little more about her experience.

The favouritism she described was of a more specific type. Someone in her department – someone perceived to have a more personal friendship with the boss – had gained what seemed like “unfair favour” in the boss' eyes. This individual had begun to strongly influence the way the boss saw people and made decisions, she had become a confidante the boss listened to. She seemed at times even to be able to change the boss' opinion about people and key decisions. Employees wondered why she had so much power and who was really running the department. Many were discouraged. The situation was having a big impact on group's productivity and Esprit des Corps.



Leaders often do things unwittingly that take the wind out of employees' sails. And everything a leader does is magnified by his or her leadership power. This is true of every leader and this one probably had no idea that she was doing something that was discouraging so many members of her team.

There is a lesson to be learned because every leader is susceptible to this type of situation – an employee connects with the boss, builds a friendship, and at times cultivates the relationship by flattering the boss or playing to his or her affections, that employee, sometimes even unwittingly, gains disproportionate influence. It's easy to see how discouraging this is to everyone else in the department. You may well have seen this at some point in your own career.

As I thought about her story it struck me that the issue is not really one of favouritism, it is about whether or not that favour has been

genuinely earned – whether it is just. All effective team building leaders treat their top performers – those who really support the direction and get the job done – differently from those who resist and don't deliver. This kind of favouritism is fair and just and it is a key plank of leadership. You should not treat genuine stars the same way as duds. Your stars deserve and have earned your favour, and, that same favour must be available to anyone else who rolls up their sleeves works hard and earns it.

When a poor performer approaches you to find out why he or she doesn't have your ear you should be comfortable replying that

influence is earned and that you value the opinions of every team member who is committed to the mission and working hard. So be careful that someone hasn't flattered their way into your favour and make sure that the benefits of hard work and commitment are earned and available to everyone on the team.

For more on the fundamentals of building strong productive teams call for a workshop.