

leadership instalments

The Doctrine of Distance

By Dan Gaynor

EARLY IN MY CAREER I UNDERWENT SOME MANAGEMENT testing. I had just been appointed as a new sales supervisor to lead a group of fewer than ten salespeople at the Edmonton Journal. After answering a battery of questions, I sat down for my briefing with the consultant. She told me something that redirected my thinking that day. She told me I should get closer to the people I led, that I was too distant.

I was aghast. How could she criticize something that was so essential to effective leadership – separation and objectivity. She was right about the distance. I had been taught that it was good. Without some “professional distance” I wouldn’t be as objective about keeping the company’s interests top of mind. I wouldn’t be able to make the tough calls. I’m sure I did my best in that moment to correct her thinking. She told me it didn’t have to be an “either, or” situation, I could do both.

Over the coming weeks, I began to think more about her suggestion. As much as I had been drilled with the “doctrine of distance”, something about what she said made sense. I started to think about the idea that I could indeed draw closer to employees and still make the tough calls when I had to.

I tried it. I made an effort to get to know the people who worked in my group much better. I scheduled time to ride along with them as they went about their sales calls. We talked about families, about passions and about frustrations. Right away, it felt much more natural and it began to change the way we worked together.

I tried harder for them and I know they tried harder for me. Very soon, I saw that when I made an effort to get to know them, they shared their thoughts with me. I discovered a powerful leadership truth: People care about leaders who care about them. That made my work with them more purposeful, more successful and immeasurably more rewarding and it didn’t compromise my objectivity. As is often the case, I had to make some changes on that team. I learned that getting closer made those tough decisions more informed. I had more confidence in them when they had to be made. The advice she gave me could not have been more correct.



When that consultant debunked an old and tired management myth and challenged me to get close to employees, she turned me in an important new direction. In the years that have passed since, I have seen her advice proven right many times. How well do you know the people you are leading? How well do they know you?

For more on how to develop the fullest potential of your leadership team call us for a workshop.