



# Bankable Leadership

Happy People, Bottom-Line Results,  
and the Power to Deliver Both

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D R . T A S H A E U R I C H



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## CHAPTER 5

# TREAT ADULTS LIKE ADULTS

I couldn't believe it. I'd only been in my job for a few weeks when human resources handed me a dress code—one that was close to five pages long.

To give you some context, I am an obsessive rule-follower. This dates back to my days in middle school where, rather than being the one causing trouble, I was busy reporting the troublemakers to the principal (don't worry—I've grown up and only do that sometimes now). And to date, I had—I believed—managed to dress myself appropriately.

But, according to the dress code, I needed help. It contained detailed guidelines and rules, clarifying the type of makeup I could wear (minimal), the length of my nails (no more than half an inch from fingertips), the style of my shoes (closed-toe only), the length of my pants (nothing cropped), and even the appearance of my undergarments (seriously, I'm not exaggerating). As I stood there with the policy burning a hole in my hands, I felt a strange feeling wash over me.

I. Was. Outraged.

*Do they really not trust me to dress myself appropriately when I come to work?*  
I fumed silently.

So what did I do? I, Dr. Goody-Two-Shoes, turned into a passive-aggressive rebel, thwarting the dress code at every turn. I'd go shopping for pants that were just long enough not to qualify as "cropped." Once, I even put on a pair of press-on nails to see if I'd get sent home, which I thought would be hilarious.

After a few weeks, I found myself standing in the shoe department of Nordstrom, clutching a pair of shoes so subtly open-toed that I knew I could get away with wearing them. Suddenly I had a moment—I hovered outside my body and looked at myself. "What am I *doing*?" I gasped.

This is apparently what otherwise-reasonable human beings do when organizations create policies to substitute for good judgment. Leaders who excessively control employees are implicitly saying that they don't believe in those employees' abilities to make decisions—they're neither helping them succeed nor driving responsibility. When managers say, "We don't have accountable employees around here," that's a warning sign that they're treating hardworking adults like children, and when that happens, both people and results suffer.

Most leaders don't do this on purpose. In my experience, at least 90 percent of unnecessary policies were created because one leader was too scared to talk to one offending employee. Most policies are for the bottom 2 percent, the people who do the stupid things that led to the policies' creation in the first place.

Overzealous policies reward terrible leadership and often don't deal with poor performers directly. Think about it: If someone on your team was wearing cutoff jean shorts, how much easier is it to complain to human resources than sit down and have this uncomfortable conversation? Then, once you have a "no jean shorts" policy, you can simply point to it and say, "Well, this is just the policy," and the offending employee won't be mad at you. It's a vicious cycle. Leaders blame the policy and employees resent it.

The clear solution here is to treat your employees like adults, letting go of tightly controlled work practices and giving them true ownership of their behavior. At Nordstrom, the site of my dress code epiphany, their policy manual consists of a concise—and genius—eight sentences:

## Employee Handbook

Welcome to Nordstrom. We're glad you're here!

Our number one goal is to provide outstanding customer service. Set both your personal and professional goals high. We have great confidence in your ability to achieve them, so our employee handbook is very simple.

We have only one rule . . . Use good judgment in all situations.

Please feel free to ask your department manager, store manager or Human Resources representative any question at any time.<sup>1</sup>

Granted, there is an element of risk involved in trusting employees to do the right thing. But it is by far the preferable choice. As Mark Leslie, founding chairman and CEO of Veritas Software, told *Inc.* magazine, "I believe if you want to be trusted, you have to trust first. . . . You will be betrayed sometimes, but the value of engendering trust is greater than the cost of being betrayed sometimes."<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I'll review two approaches to treating your employees like adults. First, we'll discuss how you can help them perform simply by *believing in their competence*. Then we'll discuss how to *engineer ownership by empowering your team*. At its core, you'll see that empowerment is about helping employees become self-sufficient. The more power you give away, the more responsibility your employees will feel.

## **BELIEVE IN THEIR COMPETENCE: "ACT AS IF"**

Have you ever had someone who believed in you and, as a result, you accomplished something you thought was impossible?

Clarence McDavid and I were in a bind. Clarence, Rose Medical Center's vice president of human resources, and I were sitting in his office, scratching our heads. A month earlier, I had joined the team to build a leadership development

program for the hospital. Among other things, I was hired to create Rose University, which would provide every employee in the organization with opportunities for professional development. A month in, we were offering a handful of fledgling leadership courses taught by Clarence's assistant director, but she had just resigned. I had other duties and our resources were tight, so having me teach these classes wasn't an option.

"I know this sounds crazy," I ventured, "but what if we trained our leaders to teach the classes?"

I saw a glint in Clarence's eyes, and he leaned in. "Tell me more," he said.

My idea was simple but risky. With one exception, none of our senior leaders had teaching experience, let alone expertise in leadership development. But I was confident there were at least ten leaders with the potential to be excellent instructors. Clarence loved the idea. "I'm in," he said.

We invited twelve senior leaders to apply to become Rose University Leadership Faculty. To be certified, each leader would work with me to build a course, complete a dry run, receive feedback, and have me shadow their first class. At least half of them openly told us we were crazy. But we persevered.

A year later we were the envy of our division. We had twenty faculty members teaching twenty-three classes, and our employee engagement scores shot to number one in our market. Even our patient-satisfaction scores were impacted—at one point, we were ranked number four across hundreds of other hospitals. It was incredible, but not surprising. We had believed that they could do it, and they proved us right.

## **What We Believe About Others Comes True**

In 1963, Dr. Robert Rosenthal, clinical psychology professor at Harvard University, published a paper suggesting that psychological experimenters' expectations affected participants' behavior.<sup>3</sup> Rosenthal warned that such self-fulfilling prophecies might also occur in classroom settings, with teachers' expectations affecting students' performance. Shortly after the article was published, Dr. Rosenthal received a letter from an unusual source—a school principal in San Francisco named Lenore Jacobson, who wanted to test this theory at her elementary school.<sup>4</sup>

All students were given an IQ test that was disguised as an assessment of academic potential. The researchers randomly labeled 20 percent of the students as having high academic potential; these were designated as the “bloomers.” Teachers were told these students had bright academic futures but weren’t told anything about how the remaining 80 percent (the control group) would perform in class. Eight months later, the IQ test was administered to the students, and the IQ scores of the first-grade bloomers were 15 percent higher than those of the control group. Let me say that again: When the teachers were told these students were smart, they actually became smarter. The differences in scores were not as marked as the grade level increased, but the pattern held: Bloomers consistently showed IQ gains despite being arbitrarily labeled as gifted. The Pygmalion effect had officially been uncovered.

A few decades later, support for the Pygmalion effect in the workplace emerged. Dov Eden and Abraham Shani studied instructors and soldiers in the Israeli Defense Forces combat command course.<sup>5</sup> Before the course, instructors were given a list of soldiers, each with a randomly assigned “command potential” (CP) reflecting soldiers’ ability and promise for the future. The instructors were told to memorize the soldiers’ names and CP scores. The researchers found that the instructors expected more from those with higher CP scores, and the students with high CP scores actually performed better. The high-CP soldiers also gave the course and their instructor glowing reviews (the left-side leader’s dream: “They like me, they really like me!”)

The simple leadership lesson is this: *What we believe about others comes true.* Incidentally, research shows that the reverse is also true: Managers who expect poor performance get exactly that (we’ll talk more about this in chapter 9).

When you “Act As If,” you are treating your employees *as if* they were the most talented, motivated, and capable people around. To “Act As If,”<sup>6</sup> you have to delve into the fundamental assumptions you’re making about your team. And remember, *you choose these assumptions.* The following table offers a few examples of different assumptions about the same behavior:

<b>SITUATION</b>	<b>NEGATIVE ASSUMPTION</b>	<b>POSITIVE ASSUMPTION</b>
An employee makes a mistake.	A policy is needed.	A conversation is needed.
An employee is late to work.	The employee is lazy or disorganized.	Something might be going on at home—how can I help?
You are leaving the office for a week for a conference.	Everyone is going to leave at 2:00 p.m.	This is a chance to get my best and brightest to man the ship.

I challenge you to monitor these assumptions in real time. When you make a judgment, ask:

- “Why do I believe that?”
- “Do I know that for a fact?”
- “What is an alternative explanation for this behavior?”

## **End the Tyranny of Policies and Procedures**

When we board an airplane, we trust the pilot to be capable of getting us safely to our destination. When we go to the hospital, we trust our doctors to be competent to address our health problem. Why, then, don’t we trust our employees to be capable of making sound decisions in *their* jobs? Why do we bog them down with rules and boundaries?

Jim Collins discusses this in *Good to Great*.<sup>7</sup> He found that when organizations hire mediocre people instead of getting rid of them, they create policies to mitigate the damage. Soon, these companies become bureaucracies and drive away their best people. They act as if employees can’t be trusted to deliver a good performance, so the employees don’t.

There are a few brave leaders and companies who have bucked the trend and eliminated policies in favor of clear expectations, reliance on their employees’ judgment, and the employment of clear consequences when good judgment isn’t used.

Many human resource professionals *love* creating policies. But Pat Lawrence isn't just any human resources professional. When she started as the senior vice president of human resources at RE/MAX, the company had a seventy-page policy manual. Pat thought that sitting new employees down to tell them all the things they *couldn't* do was neither welcoming nor helpful. Instead, Pat helps her leaders set clear expectations up front for what employees *should* do.

And slowly, over the course of seven years, Pat whittled away the RE/MAX policy manual. About five policies needed to be retained for regulatory reasons (the code of conduct, harassment and confidentiality rules, and so on), but the rest were out. As Nordstrom knows, it's all about using your best judgment. Is this a perfect solution that solves all HR difficulties? Of course not. "Sometimes employees make bad decisions," Pat wisely observes. "But [our approach] is infinitely better than saying 'We'll terminate you if any of these five hundred things happen!'"

Courtney Harrison is another example of a Bankable Leader who helped her organization treat its employees like adults. As SVP of Organization and People Development at Asurion, a start-up technology protection company, Courtney championed the goal of treating employees like adults.

The most powerful transformation took place at the manufacturing center where customer phones were repaired. When Courtney first met the center's manager, Charlie, his turnover was high and morale was low. The center also had the highest number of policies in the company, largely because of the fear that employees would steal customers' phones.

Courtney started with a philosophical conversation. "Charlie, you'll always have people stealing from you, but should you build your company around them or the 98 percent of employees who don't? If you do the latter, they'll police each other. Instead of the parent-child dynamic, they'll act responsibly. Wouldn't that be so much easier?"

Charlie was hesitant at first, but the lightbulb went on as they discussed the center's dress code. "Would you tell an adult you trust to work with your customers how to dress?" Courtney asked.

"No!" Charlie realized.

"Exactly," said Courtney. "We don't need a ten-page policy, we just need to

set expectations and create consequences if people don't follow them." It was a revelation.

Charlie held a series of town halls to clarify those expectations. "I trust you," he told employees, "but I might not have been acting like I did. We're going to start fresh. One of the things I trust you to do is to get dressed in the morning. Here's what I expect. I want you to be covered from here"—he pointed to his shoulders—"to here"—he pointed to his knees. "Nothing with holes. Nothing religious or political. No flip-flops, midriff bearing, or belly shirts. If you're not sure, go to the Gap and buy five long-sleeved T-shirts and five pairs of jeans!" The employees all laughed.

"Now," Charlie went on, "if you come to work and seem confused about this, you get three chances. The first time, you'll go home and change. The second time, you'll be sent home without pay. The third time, you're fired." The team understood. Once he started trusting his employees, they started acting like adults. Clarifying your expectations, the big point of chapter 4, is a critical aspect of treating employees like adults. It would be delusional for an organization to abandon its policies but not give some idea of what is expected. When policies go away, employees have to be responsible for their behavior, and when they make bad choices, leaders must intervene immediately.

*But I don't control the policies at my company, you might be thinking. It's not in my power to throw out the rulebook!* That may be true, but you do influence how policies are used in your team. Let's look at two policy-enforcement conversations:

Conversation 1: "Mary, thanks for coming to meet with me. When I walked by your office earlier, I noticed you were shopping on Amazon instead of taking customer calls. As you know, we have a policy against this. [Leader hands policy to employee.] I need you to follow it."

Conversation 2: "Mary, thanks for coming to meet with me. When I walked by your office earlier, I noticed you were shopping on Amazon instead of taking customer calls. When you first joined our team, remember the conversation we had about the importance of answering our calls

## **TREATING ADULTS LIKE ADULTS FOR NEW LEADERS**

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New leaders are often put in the potentially awkward position of leading former peers. Yesterday, you were friends with your coworkers, now you're their boss. This reality can turn new leaders into dictators: "Since I'm the boss now, I'd better act like one and tell them what to do!" Or you may "crack down" by making and enforcing rules that insult or alienate employees. Talk about treating employees like children!

- 1. DON'T CHANGE OVERNIGHT, BUT STILL CHANGE:** The first day you come to the office as the boss, you will need to do things differently. Tell them what's going to be different and what you expect of them. Also remind them that the trust and respect you share is the same as before.
- 2. THINK ABOUT DECISIONS:** Rather than acting unilaterally, engage your team in the decisions you make. Be sure to communicate to them how the decision will be made (for example, will the team provide input and you will decide?). It's extremely important to clarify the process.
- 3. REMEMBER YOUR PAST, BUT ACCEPT YOUR NEW ROLE:** Acknowledge the challenges of your employees' work when necessary—you were recently in their place, so ignoring their challenges will only alienate your former peers. But remember that your role *has* changed. Blindly supporting and encouraging your employees may not only make them see you as their friend, but it may also result in problems in the future (e.g., issues with respect, decision making).

quickly? We also discussed my expectation that you only use the Internet for your personal use during your lunch break. I'm asking you not to do this again, and as you know, if you do, it will result in a day without pay. I trust you to make the right decision."

Neither conversation is comfortable—Conversation 2 is probably harder. But practice shifting your perspective and put yourself in Mary's shoes. Conversation 1 insults her intelligence. Conversation 2 treats her like an adult. Which one would you choose?

## **ENGINEER OWNERSHIP AND LEAVE THE DICTATORSHIP TO NAPOLEON**

Engineering ownership is the second approach to treating your people like adults. When you do this successfully, you can give up a certain level of control to your team members, making them—and your customers—happier in the process.

Herb Kelleher, longtime Southwest Airlines CEO and Bankable Leader extraordinaire once said, "If you create an environment where people truly participate, you don't need control."<sup>8</sup> Let's illustrate the contrast between control and participation with two recent, but distinctly different, customer service phone calls—both of which I had within hours of each other.

The first was with an airline that had failed to get me to my destination on a business trip (they decided to land in Albany instead of New York City, which is only off by about 150 miles!). I was interested in a credit for my trouble. I spoke to a customer service representative, who told me about all the things she *wasn't* authorized to do, one of which was issuing a credit. I said, "Fine. Put me through to your supervisor." I thought her supervisor would be able to help, but we just repeated the kabuki theater performance I'd been through with her employee. She too explained all the things she wasn't able to do. "Fine," I said. "Put me through to your supervisor." After five minutes with the boss's boss, we'd had the exact same conversation. I hung up in disgust.

A few hours later, I called the customer service department of the flash bargain website Rue La La. “How can I help you?” the customer service representative chirped. I explained that an item I ordered had been sent in the wrong size, but that it was a final sale item and therefore not returnable. After I pleaded my case, she said, “Sure thing, ma’am. I would be happy to fully refund your purchase.” I almost fell off my chair. “We don’t normally do this,” she said, “but I can appreciate that this was our error. We want you to be happy with your experience.” Bingo! This was an empowered employee who’d been trusted to make the right decision. In one conversation, I went from someone who wasn’t sure I’d shop on this website again to being so loyal that they probably should start garnishing my wages!

Overly controlling organizations typically underperform compared to organizations that give their employees freedom to make the right choice. According to leadership guru James O’Toole, when hierarchical barriers to decision making are in place, as was the case with the airline, product and service quality goes down.<sup>9</sup> High-control organizations hold on to mediocre employees while the best and brightest flee to organizations that give them more autonomy and respect. If you take high-control practices to the extreme, you have a full-on dictatorship; all power and decision making is held at the top of the organization.

However, when employees are given power, trusted, and treated like adults, amazing things happen. Here’s an example. After a long day and a long flight, a man named Peter Shankman decided to jokingly tweet “Hey @Mortons - can you meet me at newark airport with a porterhouse when I land in two hours? K, thanks. :)”. He landed to find a tuxedo-wearing Morton’s employee waiting for him with a full steak dinner in hand.<sup>10</sup> How much would you bet that Peter Shankman will be a customer for life?

## **Empowerment Requires Smart Risks**

If empowerment is so wonderful, you might ask, why do so many companies have trouble granting it? Well, I see well-intentioned leaders fail to grant autonomy because of fear. Let’s go back to Todd Habliston, the oil and gas leader whom we met in the introduction. When Todd started his journey, he made a conscious

decision to assume the risk of empowerment. He wanted to take more vacations, delegate more work, and allow his team to take on more responsibility. He realized and accepted that mistakes would be made.

His first experiment was to have the team create the budget for the next year. He asked his employees if they'd present the budget to the board, noting his confidence in their ability and his willingness to help them. Most enthusiastically accepted, telling him how excited they were about the opportunity. But as anticipated, there were a few staff members who were uncomfortable with the gravity of the assignment. Todd worked with them to understand their fear. When he learned it was lack of knowledge of some elements of the budgeting process that frightened them, he offered weekly lunch-and-learns. At the end of the process, the team had done a great job. More importantly, Todd had taken a risk that paid off. He managed risk along the way, and his team was more engaged than ever. Todd's boss and the board were absolutely thrilled with the team's work.

Here are a few questions to start to help you get the empowerment process started in your own team. I recommend starting simply, as Todd did, because if you start throwing projects at your employees willy-nilly, you'll just create chaos.

- Make a list of all the things you're doing. What do you *have* to do and what do you *want* to do? Are the things you want to do really things you *should* be doing? Are you hoarding the interesting projects or the projects that you owned before you got promoted?
- Meet with your employees to figure out what makes them tick—what areas they'd like to do more work in, learn about, etc. Find one additional responsibility for each employee and give them latitude to make decisions related to it.
- Make a list of the decisions that require your approval or work product that requires your review. Can you delegate any approvals or reviews to your team?

## **Be Clear About the “What” But Give Them a Choice About the “How”**

Another important consideration in empowering your employees is being clear about the result you expect but less prescriptive on how it should be done. Banish the “my way or the highway” mentality forever. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, whom *Harvard Business Review* recently named the number two best-performing CEO in the world,<sup>11</sup> once explained the company’s success by saying, “We are stubborn on vision. We are flexible on details.”<sup>12</sup>

In 1982, my mother—Terri Wanger, of “Terri Wanger Rule” fame—took a job working in cable marketing for Bill Daniels under Jerry Maglio. The cable TV industry was just a few years old and cable providers were struggling to keep up with customer demand.

One day, Jerry called her to his office. “Terri,” he said, “Bill would like you to build a customer loyalty program. You know his standards. It has to be the best and it has to get us to number one in our industry. Stay within the bounds of ethics and laws. The rest is up to you.”

“But, but no one in our industry has ever focused on customer service,” Terri stammered. “He wants us to set the standard?”

“Exactly,” Jerry replied. “So you just tell us what you need to get us there and it’s yours.” Terri had been empowered. Jerry and Bill had given her a clear, measurable goal without telling her precisely how to get there.

With that, Terri started the first customer service training and improvement program in the cable TV industry. She knew that Bill’s obsessively high standards would mean nothing if they weren’t trickling down to the front line. So she began by spending time with the customer service representatives who took care of billing, customer appointments, and basic troubleshooting. On her first day in one of the operations offices, she saw one representative take her phone off the hook so she could eat lunch. Another was on the phone with a customer who had called to cancel his service. “OK, how soon would you like that to happen?” she said to the customer. And yet a third put all the telephone lines on hold so she could catch up on her paperwork.

Terri's jaw dropped. "Do you think you're giving the best customer service you're capable of?" she asked the reps bluntly.

"No!" they replied.

"OK, then," said Terri. "What's preventing you from doing that?"

They quickly gave her a laundry list of challenges, from being pulled in too many directions to old phone equipment to a lack of training to coverage of the phones during lunchtime. She took that feedback up the chain of command and made the case for the investment this program would require. She got it. Then Terri helped rewrite job descriptions, bought new equipment, and created a customer service training program to help the associates internalize and buy in to the goal of being a number one customer loyalty team.

When they were finished, things were a lot different. For instance, when customers called to cancel their cable, the representatives would work with them to solve the problem: "I am so sorry to hear that. How can we keep your business?" And within just a few months, both their customer base and their customer retention shot up.

Perhaps the most incredible part of this story was what Bill did to reward Terri for her contributions to the success of the company. He knew that she had always wanted to start her own business. After she had given notice that she was going to leave his employment to do just that, Bill asked how he could support her entrepreneurial efforts. They discussed a few ideas, and shortly thereafter he agreed to move her to a contractor position *and* provided her with favorable leasing terms (\$100/month) in one of his nearby office buildings. For eighteen more months, Terri was able to call on some of the resources of Bill's company while providing consulting and customer service guidance to Bill's marketing team.

Once again, Bill had modeled what a true, trust-based professional relationship looked like. By giving Terri a *what* to achieve without telling her *how* to do it, he gave her the freedom to succeed in the way she saw best. Thanks to Bill's leadership wisdom and Terri's ability, everybody won.

## **Give Employees Control**

I have a good friend who recently had surgery to stop bleeding in his brain after he took a nasty fall. Being the highly independent person that he is, the week

he spent in the hospital was absolutely miserable for him. No one likes being in the hospital, and the lack of control he felt over what was happening to him was unbearable. He couldn't eat the foods he wanted. He wasn't able to decide when he'd leave. He wasn't able to get up and walk around.

With his discharge approaching, he was told he'd need regular appointments with a speech therapist. Still fairly groggy, he looked at me and said, "I don't think I'm going to go to speech therapy." Being far too smart not to know how important this was, I think he was exerting the last bit of control he felt he had left.

Luckily, my friend recovered quickly and completely, but there is a lesson here for managers. Regardless of their age, job type, gender, or culture, human beings want to have a feeling of control over their lives. This is especially true at work, where most employees feel that very little is under their direct control.

Researcher Muammer Ozer has found that workers who feel control over how they approach their work have better relationships with their colleagues and are more likely to help others when needed<sup>13</sup>—solid evidence that giving your team more control helps on the people side of the Bankable Leadership spectrum.

And on the results side, when employees have autonomy, they perform better. Nancy Dodd of Montana State University and Dan Ganster of Colorado State University studied the effect of autonomy on performance.<sup>14</sup> The researchers asked undergraduates to complete clerical tests measuring grammar, spelling, and punctuation—to measure their baseline ability—and then gave them text and asked them to correct the errors. Told they'd be competing against others, participants were given different sets of instructions with varying levels of autonomy. The high-autonomy group could control the program, while the low-autonomy group had to ask a supervisor's assistance at each stage. When the authors looked at the corrected text, they found that participants with high autonomy were not only more committed to the task but also performed better, providing they received feedback on how they were doing.

A friend of mine once told me that "stress is responsibility without control." There is scientific support for this statement: One recent study found that senior leaders (who have more control) report feeling less stress at work. Gary Sherman

and his colleagues studied military and government leaders at a Harvard executive leadership development program.<sup>15</sup> They collected samples of the stress hormone cortisol and asked participants to self-report their anxiety. Researchers found that leadership positions were associated with less stress, with stress decreasing the more senior a leader was! Sherman attributed this to the fact that senior leaders have more autonomy.

There are a variety of approaches Bankable Leaders can use to give their teams a greater sense of control. For example, HCL Technologies, an India-based IT company, has created a sort of help desk dedicated to improving employees' work experience.<sup>16</sup> At any time, anyone can create an electronic ticket if something isn't quite right in their world. Maybe they don't like the food served at company functions, or they aren't happy with their manager. Tickets are routed to the person who can resolve them. Perhaps the smartest part of this approach is the fact that *only the employee who submitted the ticket can close it*. In other words, the employee has complete control and doesn't have to close the ticket until he or she is satisfied.

Here are some other ideas for how to give your employees a sense of control:

- Ask for their input on projects and work assignments.
- Ask them what changes you could implement to make their lives easier.
- Don't constrain their ability to take time off when they want or need to.
- Have them create agendas and/or run staff meetings.
- If your company does engagement surveys, consider building a task team to own the survey.
- Allow employees to influence the strategy of your department based on their unique knowledge.

## **Give Your Employees Control Over Their Work Time and Nonwork Time**

If I had a dollar for every time I've heard a leader whine that their employees are asking to work from home, I could donate all of the revenue from this book

to charity. I'm often unsure about why they're whining—giving employees flexibility and control is actually a business imperative. This includes options like nontraditional workweeks (for example, working four ten-hour days and taking Friday off), telecommuting, flexible hours, or modified vacation and sick-day policies. For example, event production company Red Frog gives employees unlimited vacation days. Though this seems like a potential disaster, it is almost never abused.<sup>17</sup>

The people and results benefits of flexible work arrangements are clear. On the people side, for example, employees who telecommute are more satisfied with their jobs and less likely to leave voluntarily. Moreover, giving employees more free time through compressed workweeks drives engagement even more than things like company picnics or social activities. On the results side, researchers have found that, on average, flexible work schedules result in a 10 percent improvement in productivity.<sup>18</sup>

Obviously, depending on the needs of your clients and customers, some types of flexibility will work and some won't. For example, some jobs require employees to be physically present (like a car mechanic) or work certain hours (like a nurse). I recommend making a list of the “non-negotiables” in terms of flexibility, then working with your team to think about the most meaningful options you can give them. I have a client whose front desk person wanted to work from home so she could focus on a series of reports she had to complete every month. My client was able to help her work from home one day every two weeks while other employees took turns covering the front desk. It worked like a charm.



Years ago, I'd just earned my master's degree and started as a junior consultant at Somerville Partners, a boutique consulting company. The CEO, Kevin Somerville, quickly became a mentor and always believed in my ability much more than I did. One week, Kevin landed a new client, flew home, came to my office and said, “I want you to be on point for this.” A shiver came over me, along with

a general fear about what would happen if I messed up. A few days later, I mustered the courage to talk to Kevin.

As an avid storyteller, Kevin provided his advice through a story about a stuffed buffalo on display at Grand Central Station. Those that passed through would do everything in the book to it: throw trash on it, stub out cigarette butts on it, kick it. Kevin once asked a caretaker how he dealt with this terrible buffalo abuse. The caretaker replied simply, “There ain’t no damage to that old buffalo that I can’t fix in five minutes.”

Wow. The new client was the buffalo, Kevin was saying, and he was the caretaker. Any mistake I made could be fixed, and he was there to back me up. Amazing things happen when leaders empower and believe in their employees. Naturally, the project went well.

I hope this chapter has helped you think about your leadership choices in a new way—many leaders I’ve worked with tell me the concept of treating employees like adults has been groundbreaking. I encourage you to honestly look in the mirror before every choice you make and ask, “Am I treating my employees like adults or like children?” If you have a particularly challenging workforce and try to argue that you *have* to use excessive rules or policies, remember to ask, “Am I Acting As If?” If you’re acting as if your team is made up of anything other than responsible, capable adults, it’s time to change your approach.

## BANKABLE ACTIONS

### Act As If

- ✓ Examine the assumptions you're making about your employees on a daily basis.
- ✓ Make the decision to view your employees as competent, well-meaning professionals with good judgment.
- ✓ Instead of writing policies, have direct and honest conversations with employees and set clear expectations for what you expect.
- ✓ Create clear and swift consequences for the 2 percent who use bad judgment.
- ✓ If you influence policy in your organization, practice the "Adult Test." Would I need to tell a high-performing employee this? If not, consider eliminating it and instead setting clear expectations and consequences for bad judgment.
- ✓ If you must follow policies, take them out of your conversations with your employees, emphasizing instead your expectations and the reasoning behind them.

### Engineer Ownership

- ✓ Ensure that you're pushing decisions down so that employees closest to customers can exercise their judgment.
- ✓ Take smart risks, empowering your employees to own projects that will challenge them.
- ✓ When empowering your employees, set crystal clear expectations for what you want accomplished, but give them leeway with the how.
- ✓ Regularly give your employees a voice in the decisions that affect them, and listen to their input.
- ✓ Give your employees control over their lives at work, giving them a choice whenever possible.
- ✓ Give employees flexibility in how they schedule their work and nonwork time.