

Articles + Publications | August 7, 2023

Water Cooler Talk: Insights From ‘The Bear’ on Right and Wrong Ways to Manage Employees

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Published in [Law360](#) on August 7, 2023. © Copyright 2023, Portfolio Media, Inc., publisher of Law360. Reprinted here with permission.

In a [survey](#) of 3,000 workers, 82% said they would consider quitting their job because of a bad manager.

“The Bear” on Hulu takes a close look at the intricacies of people management, generational challenges of today’s workforce, and how to communicate with employees to get the best from them. The show could be a playbook for employers on best practices when communicating with their teams and when delivering performance messages, including:

- Management style from the top-down impacts morale, and morale drives a lot of legal risks.
- Active listening is an effective communication tool.
- Involving employees in decisions helps to enable effective organizational and culture change.

Q&A

We spoke with Laura Yehuda, Principal with Ernst & Young’s People Advisory Services about The Bear, best practices when delivering performance messages, and the gender and generational challenges to administering performance management effectively. Laura also shared the importance of listening and the critical role it plays in the workplace.

Evan Gibbs: The Bear follows Carmy, a New York, Michelin-starred chef, who returns home to Chicago to run his family’s sandwich shop. The show focuses on Carmy’s relationship with his kitchen staff as he works to improve The Beef.

Tracey Diamond: One issue the show explores is the challenges faced by young managers, particularly female ones, who are charged with managing older employees. In this clip, a young black female sous chef hired by Carmy is speaking with Richie, an older white male who has worked for The Beef for many years.:

Sydney: It doesn’t have to be a place where the food is ... or everybody acts ... and feels ... , it could be a good,

legit spot.

Richie: Okay, you know what, Sydney? You're getting a little aggressive and I think maybe you should just pause and take a breath before you start driving. Man or woman, I'm not discriminating, it's dangerous to get behind the wheel when you're hysterical.

Laura Yehuda: There are two things that could have gone differently. The way Sydney delivers the message, and the way Richie responds. First, Sydney is negative and critical. She might have flipped it around to be positive, focus on solutions, and use a collaborative tone.

Tracey: Sydney could have said, "We have an opportunity to improve the way we make sandwiches."

Laura: That's right. Now Richie has some work to do. He took the conversation to a different level and introduced a little sexism along with it. He had an opportunity to listen, ask questions, and gather more information, so he can learn from this new perspective and improve the business. But he lashes out.

Tracey: That's something we say to a lot to our witnesses when we're prepping them for a deposition. "When you hear the question, wait a beat before you respond, and gather your thoughts."

Evan: That pregnant pause is helpful. People start to fill in the gap, at least in depositions.

Tracey: I could see how that tactic could also be a useful performance management tool.

Evan: Do you see a difference in the communication style between generations? My older mentors were more direct, more brusque. Since then, I've seen people soften their approach with Gen X or millennials.

Laura: There is not enough training on how to communicate in a business context. People learn on the job, and that's a tough thing now with hybrid work. Empathy and communication have always felt like soft skills, but they're completely necessary in our new world of work.

Tracey: Let's get back to The Bear. How should a supervisor handle employees who push back whenever management tries to do things differently or make improvements?

Laura: Have a proactive approach to lead through change so that you can proactively avoid employee resistance. Many business leaders think of change as something rational that needs to be managed. They fail to take emotions into account.

With someone like Richie, managers should be empathetic, and accessible during difficult periods. Encouraging dialogue, responding to feedback, communicating specifics, acknowledging what's not yet known, involving employees in decisions – those things help build community.

Tracey: What struck me the most on that list was the idea of honesty around what's going to happen, so that employees don't feel like they have been left in the dark.

Laura: One of the big rules of human-centered change management is involvement. It must be proactive and can't happen in the moment. It has to be a well-thought-out plan.

Tracey: There's another scene in *The Bear* where Sydney tries to communicate with a long-time worker, Tina, who resents Sydney's intrusion. What recommendations do you have for young managers when they're dealing with this type of situation?

Laura: Be confident in language, use strong vocal inflection. Giving a preview of what the performance check-in will look like is always a good idea, so the person you're communicating with isn't surprised or criticized.

Evan: What we generally recommend to our clients is that the expectations for the employees should be clearly laid out, so there's no confusion or misunderstanding about what an employee should or shouldn't be doing in their role with the company.

Tracey: How could Sydney or Carmy, or any of the managers make Richie feel like he's providing value?

Laura: Something I've seen great employers implement in their organizations is called reverse mentoring. It pairs younger employees with older executives. It helps older executives learn things like digital skills and how to use influencers. It promotes diversity, leads to increased retention of millennials, and helps drive culture change.

Tracey: What is the takeaway here in terms of what makes for effective workplace communications?

Laura: It's about listening. Listening is one of the most underrated, but the most critical aspect of any kind of effective communication in the workplace or anywhere else.

Conclusion

Managing a workforce in the real world requires constant communication between the employer and employees. Managers who do not understand and practice communication best practices, handle conflict resolution, and master soft skills can find themselves in hot water.

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