

Bad know-it-all managers don't 'get it'

The indicator I told my children to use when looking for a job was to check the employees' parking lot to see what type of cars the employees could afford to drive.

That sage fatherly advice is from Dan Uhles of Du Quoin, Ill., responding to what I'd written about how everything a business does affects hiring. And Dan's right; we need to add the parking lot to the list. However, one caveat: Dan's observation calls to mind the company I once ran across that assigned parking spaces to employees based on their car's value — the cheaper your car, the farther your parking spot from the door and visitors' parking. (Suggested company motto: "If you roll up in a Kia, we don't wanna see ya.")

And then there's the problem of the company that pays well because it's such an awful place to work. Which brings us to what got me thinking: the comments of the irrepressible Mary Cooley. She's an HR consultant in Albuquerque, and she says: "Every organization is either a talent magnet or talent repellent. I can usually

Corporate Curmudgeon



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tell within 30 seconds which one it is." I like the idea of an employee satisfaction analysis in half a minute. What can you see in that time? Mary says: "You can see if the people are trusted. Does management 'get it'? You can see it in the posture of the people who work there, in their eyes and tone of voice. Or, you see the walking dead. That's when you see a lack of eye contact and slumping shoulders."

I wonder what the company that has its employees with bad cars park far from the entrance would do with Mary Cooley's observation — maybe issue sets of wax lips with wide smiles and

those plastic glasses with big, bright eyes painted on the lenses. Or, they could just work with her. One executive who did just that was taking over a company in Albuquerque, Southwest Glass, and gave her the intriguing assignment of answering the question, "Why do people keep leaving?" (And by leaving, we're talking triple-digit turnover.)

Mary began meeting with employees, and when she got to an employee who'd been with the company since its early days, he told her: "Let me quote to you from the employee handbook. It's the very last line you read, and then you sign your name. It says, 'We were here before you, and we'll be here after you.'"

She took the old handbook to the new owner and tore it up in front of him. The new handbook says things like, "Welcome — we're only as good as the people who choose to do this with us." That reflects the mind-set of the new owners: "They 'get it,'" she says. "They have the attitude of 'We need you' and 'We're in this together.' They'll work the line and they'll ride along

with drivers, and pretty soon the employees start saying, 'What if?' Once the workers know they are respected, they know their ideas will be treated with respect."

It's been seven years since Mary tore up the old handbook. The company's revenues have more than quadrupled, and turnover has fallen to the point where people can't think of the last time anyone left for a better job. But, I wondered, can management attitude alone accomplish all that?

I talked with the owner, Tony Baca, and asked what ELSE they'd done at his company. He replied that they had broadened the company's bonus system, but that was out of a sense of fairness, not an attempt to buy retention. As he put it: "We're not bribing anyone to stay here. We set out to create the best situation employees could have if they work in this type of business. It's not just money, but attitude and appreciation."

And so, yes, this is another triumph for management that "gets it." What is astounding is how many companies still don't get it. The "secret" of good manage-

ment — hire good people and let them rise to the level of trust and appreciation they encounter — is no secret at all. Book after seminar after training video pounds in that message, and yet the bad habits persist. Why?

Every bad manager I've ever met would say the same thing: "I know all about good management." Knowing it all is the distinguishing feature of lousy bosses. That's because once you believe you know, you stop listening, stop learning. So, bad management is just the same old, old human failing, one of the seven deadlies: pride. Therefore, in the Handbook of Bad Management, we can truly write, "I was here before you got here and will be here after you're gone."

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