

Facts, Figuring and Finger Pointing: As a Manager, Try to Rely on 'Just the Facts'

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For my first *Modern Tire Dealer* column, I am going to modify the journalistic concept of “Report, Inference and Judgment” to managing your businesses. I prefer to address “Facts, Figuring and Finger Pointing.” Report actually refers to writing based on the facts; writers are taught to avoid inferring or making a judgment based on personal beliefs.

Many managers use finger pointing (judgment) to get through issues and mini-crises. They quickly gather various sources of data — often judgments from other people — and command a response. The problem is finger pointing is only an expression of approval or disapproval of the situation; it doesn't address resolving the conflict. It is a hurdle toward your goal of managing the situation and developing employee and customer loyalty.

Finger pointing is a colossal waste of time and should be avoided at all costs.

Figuring is the next level of management. Figuring is sometimes used as a managing tool when managers feel they are stuck. It is a style that relies on second – and third-hand information before taking action. Managers and owners alike can't be everywhere at once, and usually in the presence of an owner or manager, employees and customers are on their best behavior. And so goes the routine of the tattletale: “Yesterday, Johnny did this, or Sally said that.” And managers feel they must do something about it.

Figuring is the same as inferring. When you reach a conclusion based on what you know or have heard without proof the conclusion is factual, that is inference. For example, with the lights turned on, you can tell exactly where the coffee table is positioned in your living room. However, what if the power goes out the next evening and it is pitch black in your house? In the dark, you may not know for sure the coffee table is in the same place. But you might infer it is, based on your knowledge of the room, and whether or not someone else has been in the room without your supervision.

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There are consequences to your actions if you are wrong. You can't use your big toe as a divining rod. If you infer something that isn't true at your business, people will call you out on it. None of us are clairvoyant. If you weren't there to see it or hear it, all you can do is put people on notice.

"I heard or am aware of an issue happening in the shop. I am letting

you and everyone else know that I will be on the lookout for this behavior and the consequences will be stiff" is one approach. At this point, what you are doing is building credibility. Over time, say, three or four instances, you can start to take stronger approaches.

"This is the fourth time something like this has come to my attention, and I am putting a stop to it now." But if the behavior only happens behind your back, ask yourself these two questions:

Why do employees act so differently when I'm not around? (Hint: You're a dictator.)

Why am I never around? You have to make your presence felt and commit to "being on the floor" for a while. If this is not the norm, then you need to address why it is not. Maybe you need to delegate more low level tasks to others.

Facts are what drive good owners and managers. Sure, occasionally we have limited resources (who doesn't have time constraints?) and we must cobble together a solution that includes some figuring (inferring). But in order to create credibility and make sure people do what they are asked to do, we must strive to take action only on facts. Facts are first-person reports that involve undisputable, verifiable elements of a story.

Facts are undeniable and always told in "I" statements: "I saw, I was, I heard you say...." Facts build trust, while figuring and finger pointing destroy it.

Think of these two statements:

“I have seen you come in late by more than 15 minutes each day this week. Tell me why this is happening.”

“Bob told me last week that you were late a couple of times. Are you drinking again?”

Which statement do you think the employee will trust more? Which statement will raise defensiveness?

The job of the owner or manager of a shop is simple. (I didn't say easy!) Allow employees to do their respective jobs in the most efficient, effective and economical way possible. That means you remove barriers they can't, or talk them through an issue. You can only do your job if everyone is talking about the issues openly, honestly, and with the intention of solving the problem.

Facts, figuring or finger pointing — which method are your managers using right now? ■

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