

“An approach to approachability for managers”

How approachable are you as a manager?

In a recent study by Eversheds LLP the top three most important attributes in a manager were identified by staff as:

1. Approachable (77.8% of respondents)
2. Honesty (74.9%)
3. Clear decision making (71.7%)

And yet studies have repeatedly shown that many people do not feel comfortable about approaching their boss, and yet good managers need people to talk to them.

“Ah but I have an open door policy” I can hear you say. In fact, it matters not a jot how approachable you think you are. The only thing that matters is other people’s perception.

A client of ours believed he was a very approachable fellow, and indeed he was very outgoing and friendly and he knew that he operated an “open door” policy. He was always pleased to welcome anyone into his office. But he was exceptionally busy, he also had a secretary sitting outside his office and he was a very important person.

He was devastated when staff feedback indicated that one of the problems they felt was that he was not approachable. How could this be? Of course he was approachable? “He operated an open door policy – the whole organisation did”.

If managers want to appear approachable to their staff, it is not sufficient to sit behind their “open door policy”. It is not sufficient to just think you are approachable, what is needed is an approach to actually achieve approachability! Some very simple actions can be taken to dramatically change perceptions.

Firstly managers must have the attitude that they are only as successful as the actions of the people who work for them i.e. a manager’s success depends on his or her people. Therefore it is an important part of the manager’s role to keep the people motivated and committed.

Secondly the manager must accept that most people want to be recognised as individuals and not just as a cog in a well oiled machine or team.

And thirdly, most importantly, the manager must accept that he or she will not just “be” approachable but he must take some time to do things that make him approachable.

Being approachable is a result of your actions and not a result of what you think!

So what are some simple actions you can take to make yourself more approachable?

Many managers are just too busy today to casually spend time with their staff. But we suggest that in order to improve approachability, managers should treat this as part of management work that needs to be completed each day.

Even 10 minutes a day spent on this task can achieve considerable changes.

Firstly the manager must build rapport and empathy with their people :

- Take every opportunity to get to know the people e.g.
 - Talk in the lift
 - Have coffee machine/water cooler conversations (get your own coffee sometimes)

- Let people get to know you (you will have to tell people personal things about yourself).
- Talk to your staff about themselves and about what they do outside work

A massive difference in your approachability can be achieved if you spend a few minutes talking about non work issues to your staff – just aim to do this for 10 minutes a day. Also try to do this in front of other people rather than in private, they will then see that you are approachable.

There are then a series of other actions to consider:

- Be aware of gate keepers e.g. secretaries, who will see it as part of their role to stop people seeing you. If you have a gatekeeper you will need to make yourself available by taking some positive action to initiate contact with people who work for you. (Note: not all gatekeepers are secretaries – some managers will discourage their staff from talking with more senior managers)
- Whenever possible communicate face to face – NOT via email. Email is excellent for communicating factual information but it is not a good method of communicating anything where you want to get buy in, or understand how people think about an idea or suggestion
- Private space breeds mistrust so
 - Only close your door if it is essential
- Have personal things eg childrens pictures, family photos, interesting

things – not just diplomas and certificates in your office.

- Be careful that your manner does not give the impression that you are always too busy to consider anyone else's problems. (Remember if your people have a problem – you have a problem)
- Respond quickly to any problems or issues raised even if you do not solve them. Just explain why
- Welcome suggestions and respond quickly, let people have ideas and give them credit.

Just a small amount of effort and time can make a significant difference. The client previously mentioned was devastated when one of his staff members told him – “In the past you have only ever spoken to me when there was a problem”. He thought he was approachable but had inadvertently created the completely opposite perception.

As a manager how approachable are you?

Do you know what your staff would say if they were asked the same question about you? If not do you think you should find out? And better still take some actions to make yourself more approachable.

This article was written by Mark Greasley from Inom Limited. Inom provide management development training and specialise in working with organisations who want to have a committed high performing workforce.

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