

Mission Ready

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Assign Realistic Goals

There is a saying among the officers in the Marine Corps, in war and in peace: “Be careful what you ask a Marine to do, because he’ll die trying.” The officer, instead of being tempted to exploit the eager resources at his/her command, feels a grave responsibility towards its use. In a very real sense, the officer feels obliged to sometimes protect the Marine from himself, because completing the mission means everything to a Leatherneck.

One can imagine an executive or manager rubbing hands together at the prospect of having employees who were willing to totally exhaust themselves in pursuit of their assigned goals. The manager might also be tempted to take advantage of that kind of passion, and perhaps inflate the goals—on the theory that if the employee is told to aim for the stars he/she might very well hit the moon. Of course, if the employee does “hit the moon,” the manager, secretly delighted, must put on a public face of disappointment, in order to maintain credibility with his subordinates; because, after all, the inflated goal was not achieved.

Is there any harm in assigning one’s employees goals that cannot be realistically met? A Marine officer would say, unequivocally, “Yes!” The officer knows full well that Winning must become a habit, and that Marines who continually fail to complete the mission, despite their own best efforts, are learning the wrong lesson. No officer would cynically devise a

“mission impossible,” to get the most out of his Marines; yet many corporate managers and supervisors do so without blinking an eye.

Perhaps if his or her employees’ lives were at stake, the manager might be less capricious when it came to goal setting. Instead of establishing targets by means of an airy math in the board room, he or she might take into consideration the consequences of setting up employees for failure. Lives may not be at risk, but careers are. The employee who is continually given unreachable goals learns the habit of failure. He soon begins to take stock of his situation. He sees that those around him who only “hit the moon” are not fired, and that the managers, when they are among themselves, are all smiles. He begins to suspect his goals, handed down by management, were arbitrary. Cynicism sets in, replacing his initial eagerness to accomplish great things; bitterness follows, as he realizes these unattainable goals—linked as they often are to commission, bonus, and salary increases—have effectively capped his income. The manager, in trying to boost performance by exhorting his/her subordinates to “reach for the stars” has instead created a free agent mentality.

When assigning goals to our personnel, we would be wise to follow the wisdom of the Marine officer, who creates winners, not losers, through realistic goal setting.