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Helping a co-worker during the recession

Staff Writer

Lisa Anderson was in senior management when her company kept changing. She showed people how to focus on their work to achieve positive outcomes. Her consulting firm, LMA Consulting Group Inc., is in Claremont, Calif. — By Mildred L. Culp —

Business Columnist

Are people sufficiently unselfish in the workplace to help a co-worker through the recession? In the book "Why Loyalty Matters" (forthcoming, July, BenBella) authors Timothy Keiningham and Lerzan Aksoy write that "it is our loyalty to others at work (our peers, supervisors and direct reports) that most strongly impacts our overall happiness through our work. ... We spend far too much of our lives working not to derive some pleasure from it. But doing so requires that we build strong connections with others. And strong connections are built on loyalty."

Lisa Anderson of LMA Consulting Group Inc., in Claremont, Calif., acknowledges that not every co-worker will be interested in helping peers. She believes that this is changing as people recognize the increasing value of teamwork.

"In my experience, co-workers can have a significant effect helping each other keep their job," she says. "Prior to consulting, as vice president of operations, I went through much organizational chaos during times of high change. Workers were continually concerned about losing their jobs. I helped them focus on how to make the company successful and therefore themselves, rather than worry." Profitability went up. All kept their jobs. Their attitude remained positive and open to the next challenge.

Work-life success coach Marilyn Suttle of Suttle Enterprises LLC, in Novi, Mich., thinks that co-workers are likely to help each other out of fear. "You help yourself when you help others," she states. "If you want to stay viable and stay working, you need concrete relationships that you could draw on and learn from, even if you're struggling." She recommends helping before you begin to struggle.

Recognition

Many people won't do much in the workplace without receiving direct benefit for their efforts. They want the organization to recognize their contributions, including those achieved through co-worker relationships. However, Will Sparks, a professor of behavioral sciences and director of the master of science in organization development at the McColl School of Business, Queens University of Charlotte, N.C., is skeptical about rewards from organizations.

"Companies are looking at ratios, efficiencies and targets, and really good nice people are let go without rhyme or reason. It's the intrinsic value that the person who's providing the help receives," Sparks observes.

Bonding

The fact that developing connectedness in the workplace might be your only reward doesn't mean that helping a co-worker wastes your time. But how can you do it? Here are some suggestions:

"Team to focus on specific visible and remarkable results. Results are key, because when you can refer to them as fact-based, that will help you help each other." (Anderson)

"Cover for co-workers. Stay late and help them finalize a presentation. Coach when skills are missing." (Sparks)

"Promote each other's results (internally and externally). You'll be more credible, more often heard" and able to sharpen the message for both of you. (Anderson)

"Become an accountability buddy. Form a group of accountability buddies with weekly meetings and talk about how you can stay relevant in the work force, what you need to learn, what you aren't doing and what you should be doing more of. Knowing what others are seeing keeps you on the right path." (Suttle)

Here's the bottom line: Even in the best companies, helping a co-worker becomes its own reward. True, you might receive compensatory benefit if that co-worker or another reaches out to help you. But that might not happen immediately, and it might not happen at all.

Further, while the organization might take note, the people most likely to benefit from your gesture are you, your co-worker and your work group. If the company notices and rewards you, that's excellent. Jump up and down. Smile. If you're fired and the co-worker remains, remind yourself that you were committed to doing a good job. Helping your co-worker was part of it.

Editor's note: Dr. Mildred L. Culp welcomes your questions at culp@workwise.net.

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