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“The People, Stupid”  
Success is Driven by People

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I practiced law for ten years, before progressing into an executive management position with a Global Fortune® 100 company. I have been very successful in both roles, so I look forward to my next career progression. I am often asked how I do it. Naturally, the good people asking this question understand that a lot of hard work and dedication goes into my success. Of course, that is not what they mean. What they are really asking is less obvious and in many ways more important.

**The People, Stupid**

Leaving hard work and dedication aside, my success is driven by my genuine respect and care for my colleagues, including, without limitation, those I work for and who work for me. This comes naturally to me, but I still have to remind myself of how important colleagues, co-workers, and vendors are on those days when it seems nothing can go right. During the times that Murphy’s Law reigns, I remind myself by referring to an expression I modified from Bill Clinton’s 1992 presidential campaign. As you may recall, President Clinton’s then campaign manager, James Carville, coined the phrase “the economy, stupid” to remind Bill Clinton and the entire staff that no matter what was happening in the midst of a frenetic and chaotic presidential campaign, the economy underpins everything. That phrase

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always struck a chord with me, because it reminds me that in life, as in the practice of law and business, it is “the people, stupid” that underpins everything.

“The people, stupid,” is as much my guiding principle as it is a driving force. Do not worry, I am not saying I think people are stupid. What I am saying is that my successes are documented in business deals and happy client testimonials, but they ultimately are about people. Failure to understand this basic underpinning is the reason many talented and intelligent people do not go as far as they would like in their careers.

Yes, I am an expert in commercial real estate. Yes, I am a capable and seasoned executive manager. Yes, I have many other skills that I apply on a daily basis. Yes, the primary object of my professional expertise is real property. Yes, yes, and yes to all those thoughts and questions. Regardless, there is not a single thing I accomplish without the assistance of other people. From other lawyers, strategists, accountants, brokers, architects, engineers, project managers, and so on, I manage, direct, interact with, associate with, or in some way rely upon them to achieve my success. They are not incidental to my success; they are the reason for my success. Of course, I am in control and I am guiding, directing, managing, and overseeing all of these very competent people, most of whom I personally selected for their proven ability to deliver for me. After all, that is how business gets done.

**Respect, Courtesy, Kindness**

Respect, courtesy, and kindness are the attitudes that drive my behavior. I call them attitudes because they mean more than throwing a few kind words someone's way. They are a behavioral model that makes people feel good about their employer, boss, and job, which directly translates into a better work environment, higher morale, and increased productivity.

I take time to talk to everyone. The café server, day porter, office manager, local vendors, and so on, but most importantly, I take extra time to know, value, and understand my staff. I know their birthdays, anniversaries, how many kids they have, and generally what's going on in their lives (up to their level of comfort.) I take the time to know, because I genuinely care and want to know. The staff senses my genuineness and they respond to it. Going through the process of getting to know my staff leads to some loosening and tightening of how I approach each individual, because there is no one size fits all. Some of my staff cannot engage in the morning without some pleasantries first. Others dislike the pleasantries and want to jump into the business discussion. I adjust for individual personalities, but I also make sure they know I am always available for them. In return for my genuine respect, courtesy, and kindness, I get 200% effort. "The people, stupid."

My staff are fiercely loyal to me and deliver high quality work product. I know there will always be difficult times when one has to be the manager and

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discipline an employee. My caring relationship with my staff does make that a bit more difficult in one sense; however, it also makes it easier in another sense. I am always fair and non-judgmental in my feedback, criticisms, and disciplines. In return, my staff respects me more for being firm when needed, but fair in the end.

I believe in being hard on the problem, but soft on the people. Malice and intentional misconduct are never acceptable, but I have found they are rare in the workplace. Most people are receptive and respond positively when managed fairly. Moreover, as a manager I do not want to spoil the relationship or sour the employee on the company because of a non-malicious act. Accordingly, I use a few expressions or tactics that are designed to be hard on the problem, but soft on the person.

For example, a couple of years back I discovered that a staff member was routinely going around company process steps because she determined, on her own, that they were unnecessary. I believed the steps were necessary and I was concerned, so I presented the issue and asked her to explain. She explained but the explanation was not good enough for me. Instead of telling her I was upset or disappointed, I explained the company process and the reasons for the process. I then went on to say that you may not agree with the process, but that is irrelevant. The name on the outside of the building is not yours or mine. When your name is on the outside of the building you can write your own processes, but for now it is not your name or my name so we must do as the company directs us to do. This was

understood and accepted by the employee and she has been an excellent performer since. My message to her was firm, respectful, but not judgmental or blameworthy. This provided her with the psychological means of accepting the discipline without feeling scolded.

### **What an Open Door Really Means**

Most companies and managers profess to have an open door policy. As a manager I have an open door policy, but mine is a bit different. I encourage my staff to talk to me about anything on their mind at any time. I have taken calls at 11:00pm on weekdays, 8:00am on weekends, and I have met staff at the office or at coffee shops to talk at all hours. I do this not because I want to be dumped on, but because I genuinely respect and care about my staff and I want to help. In turn, only once has an employee attempted to bring a topic to my attention that I thought was inappropriate. I told her that and the conversation ended there. Staff use me as a sounding board, a sympathetic ear, and for guidance. The talks are almost always about conflicts with co-workers or clients, so for them to have me as an outlet and source of resolution works well for them, me, and the company. Additionally, it strengthens the professional bond and increases trust, which results in better quality work product.

I particularly encourage dialogue around issues related to a client, vendor, or other resource. I would rather know about the issue or conflict, so that I can guide a

proper resolution that maintains the relationship, than find out after the relationship has been damaged. As I tell my staff repeatedly, I can fix almost any transaction, but damaged relationships are much harder or impossible to fix. “The people, stupid”.

### **Protection from Management**

Anyone that has sat around a management team meeting knows these meetings can be full of dialogue, differing opinions, vague pronouncements, and seemingly endless decision making processes. It is a critical role of management to protect staff from the vagueness and chaotic nature of management. I am always sure to protect my staff by providing clear, unequivocal statements even when the management team is vague. I have succinct rules where corporate processes or policies may be verbose and confusing. I provide assurances where the company may be unsure. All this serves to harmonize the staff and keep everyone level-headed and focused on the same goals and objectives. “The people, stupid”.

### **Conclusion**

In the end, I work hard and am dedicated to my profession and employer. However, I and all managers would be remiss not to acknowledge the extraordinary efforts of our staff. Likewise, we would be equally remiss not to take responsibility for the extraordinary effort good management takes. The practice of law and management is nothing if not about “the people, stupid.”