



EMPLOYEE RETENTION

Do Your Employees Feel Respected?

by Kristie Rogers

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When you ask workers what matters most to them, feeling respected by superiors often tops the list. In a recent survey by Georgetown University’s Christine Porath of nearly 20,000 employees worldwide, respondents ranked respect as the most important leadership behavior. Yet employees report more disrespectful and uncivil behavior each year.

What accounts for the disconnect? Although employees who aren’t shown respect are acutely aware of its absence, people who feel respected on a regular basis—typically, those in managerial or other high-status roles—don’t think about it very much. So leaders may simply be unaware of the problem. But research I’ve conducted shows that this is only part of the explanation. A bigger issue is that leaders have an incomplete understanding of what constitutes workplace respect—so even well-meaning efforts to provide a respectful workplace may fall short.

My research indicates that employees value two distinct types of respect. *Owed respect* is accorded equally to all members of a work group or an organization; it meets the universal need to feel included. It's signaled by civility and an atmosphere suggesting that every member of the group is inherently valuable. In environments with too little owed respect, we typically see Tayloristic overmonitoring and micromanagement, incivility and abuse of power, and a sense that employees are interchangeable. *Earned respect* recognizes individual employees who display valued qualities or behaviors. It distinguishes employees who have exceeded expectations and, particularly in knowledge work settings, affirms that each employee has unique strengths and talents. Earned respect meets the need to be valued for doing good work. Stealing credit for others' success and failing to recognize employees' achievements are signs that it is lacking.

One of the subtler challenges in creating a respectful atmosphere is finding the right balance between the two types of respect. As Arizona State University's Blake Ashforth and I wrote in a recent paper, an imbalance can create frustration for workers. For example, workplaces with lots of owed respect but little earned respect can make individual achievement a low priority for employees, because they perceive that everyone will be treated the same regardless of performance. That could be the right mix for settings in which goals need to be accomplished as a team, but it risks reducing motivation and accountability. By contrast, workplaces with low owed respect but high earned respect can encourage excessive competition among employees. That may serve a purpose in environments, such as some sales forces, where workers have little interdependence or reason to collaborate. But it could hinder people from sharing critical knowledge about their successes and failures, and it often promotes cutthroat, zero-sum behavior. When they understand these nuances, leaders can craft an environment that is right for their situation—in most cases, one with high levels of both kinds of respect.

Employees who feel respected are more grateful for—and loyal to—their firms.

Because people's jobs are often central to who they are and how they perceive themselves, respectful cues in a professional setting are important signals of social worth. What's more, employees often join organizations in the hope of *developing* their identities over time, by growing professionally and becoming better versions of themselves. Respect is an important feedback mechanism and catalyst for this growth. Research by London Business School's Herminia Ibarra

describes how new employees experiment with novel and often uncomfortable behaviors, gradually incorporating them into their “real selves.” My research with Blake Ashforth and Arizona State University’s Kevin Corley highlights this experimentation and finds that feeling respected at work validates those trial behaviors, helping employees go from thinking “this feels odd” to believing “maybe this is really me” and cementing their personal growth.

A respectful workplace brings enormous benefits to organizations. Employees who say they feel respected are more satisfied with their jobs and more grateful for—and loyal to—their companies. They are more resilient, cooperate more with others, perform better and more creatively, and are more likely to take direction from their leaders. Conversely, a lack of respect can inflict real damage. To quote from the best-selling book *Crucial Conversations*, “Respect is like air. As long as it’s present, nobody thinks about it. But if you take it away, it’s all that people can think about.” Research supports this assertion, finding that 80% of employees treated uncivilly spend significant work time ruminating on the bad behavior, and 48% deliberately reduce their effort. In addition, disrespectful treatment often spreads among coworkers and is taken out on customers.

I spent 15 months studying a unique work program for female inmates of a state prison. Nowhere are the differences between a disrespectful environment and a respectful one clearer than in a setting where people shift back and forth each day between being inmates and being employees. Although outfitted in the same orange clothing for both roles, the women interact with others in vastly different ways.

How Televerde Built a Culture of Respect

Televerde is a technology-focused business-to-business marketing firm staffed largely by inmates. Shortly after its founding, in 1995, Jim Hooker acquired the operation—consisting of seven women in a single-wide trailer on the property of an Arizona women’s prison—and took over as CEO. At the time, Televerde had one computer and no paying customers. Hooker recognized the potential to pair a need in the expanding tech market with the opportunity to provide valuable jobs for incarcerated women. The work entails calling businesses on behalf of Televerde’s clients with the goal of making appointments with the client’s sales team. In recent years the inmate employees have helped fuel an extraordinary run of profitability, and the company experienced a compound annual growth rate of 8.5% over the past decade. It now employs 650 people—425 of whom are inmates—and has nine call centers in the United States, Scotland, Argentina, and Australia. Perhaps most impressive,

recidivism among its inmate employees is 80% lower than the national rate. Hooker's strategic genius was to recognize a need in the marketplace, but I believe it's his emphasis on owed and earned respect that has enabled Televerde's success.

Owed respect.

I conducted 92 interviews and spent 185 hours observing operations in three of Televerde's call centers. Although I interviewed members at all levels of the organization, I focused on new employees, reasoning that respect dynamics would be most salient when the experiences were novel. Women arrive for their first day of work with their identities stripped and their self-worth diminished by months or years of prison life. While society in general devalues incarcerated women, stereotyping them as dangerous, evil, and bad mothers, Televerde communicates that they are valued and deserve the chance to be successful members of the business world.

Although all inmates are required to work, jobs vary in pay and prestige. Televerde pays up to the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour—significantly more than the pay for most prison jobs, such as kitchen work, cleaning, and landscaping. The orientation sessions I observed began with a discussion of the company's history and successes, including major accomplishments and awards described as resulting from the tremendous work of the women in the call centers. The newcomers were welcomed as "Televerdians" and told, "As soon as you come through that door, you are a coworker, not an inmate."

Employees are addressed in the most personal way permitted by prison regulations—"Ms. X," never "inmate" or as a number. Trainers and company leaders work at understanding their perspectives. I saw them explain complicated business concepts using scenarios that the women were likely to have encountered previously: For instance, they elucidated organizational charts using familiar restaurants as examples and discussed supply chain management in the context of dealing drugs.

Company leaders also communicate that newcomers are a high-priority investment. They describe the many opportunities for professional development, such as participation in specialized training sessions, professional book clubs, and a six-month series of workshops in the year prior to release, aimed at preparing women mentally, emotionally, and professionally for the transition. They tell workers that after release they may have the opportunity to work at the corporate office—and about 25% have done so. The women can also apply for Televerde scholarships toward higher education.

As a final project for the two-week classroom training I sat in on, each new employee presented a business plan, building a hypothetical company around an idea or a passion. Televerde managers, directors, and executives attended the presentations.

Leaders are also intentional about how they present employees to outsiders. When existing or potential clients visit the call centers, managers speak about the professionalism, passion, and competence of the staff. Recalling her experience joining Jim Hooker in a meeting with a client group, one employee said, “He sat there just like a proud father....He did not interrupt. He didn’t correct. It was very respectful, and he totally trusted us to carry out an intelligent conversation with the clients.”

Owed respect permeates the culture. Other inmate employees communicate their support for and availability to all newcomers—for example, by offering to help them understand training materials after work hours or by sharing stories of how steep the learning curve was for them. In one call center, experienced employees organized a social afternoon with the newcomers. Members of the two groups learned about one another, shared tips for navigating life in the call center, and discussed their evolving career aspirations.

This owed respect is strengthened by artifacts in the workplace that remind employees of their value—for example, a signed poster from a client company’s celebrity CEO thanking employees for their outstanding work. The workspace is designed to minimize differences in status: Newcomers, experienced employees, and managers sit in identical cubicles near others working on the same project, and it’s understood that questions from newcomers are not a disruption.

These practices establish and reinforce an authentic, consistent foundation of owed respect for all staff members. Here’s how one employee described it: “At Televerde you are treated like an adult. You are going to be acknowledged as a human being, someone of value, someone who has worth.” Over time it became apparent to me that the consistent experience of owed respect is a driver not just of employee well-being but also of the company’s high performance.

Earned respect.

Establishing and upholding a high level of earned respect for the inmate employees requires managerial creativity, because prison restrictions stipulate that they may not be given raises, bonuses, or promotions. Instead, from day one of the hiring process they must clear specific hurdles, such as passing a typing test and successfully completing a phone interview. Such milestones continue throughout the training. In the sessions I observed, they took the form of exams, a business plan presentation, and sales calls with mentors, with each small victory providing an opportunity for employees and managers to formally recognize the newcomers' achievements.

Newcomers also participate in frequent one-on-one feedback sessions with a corporate or an inmate employee trainer. Trainers at both levels emphasized to me the importance of being honest in these sessions and never giving undeserved praise. Consistent feedback continues after training is complete, through a quality control process in which accomplishments are recognized and developmental feedback is provided. Managers relay positive feedback from clients and prospects, giving employees reinforcements of respect from beyond the prison walls.

Workers progressively saw themselves less as inmates and more as professionals.

Televerde also publicizes employee achievements internally. Whenever an employee secures a sales lead, she rings a bell—the signal for peers and managers to applaud. (The first time an employee rings the bell, I was told, she gets a standing ovation.) Managers and trainers award certificates celebrating outstanding performance—for example, when a worker reaches a threshold amount of revenue generated. The women proudly display these certificates in their cubicles.

In addition, managers make individual performance transparent to other employees. In some cases, performance goals and each employee's progress toward them are written on a whiteboard visible to the whole team. This transparency lets employees connect expressions of earned respect, whether directed toward themselves or toward peers, to specific achievements. It also encourages employees to measure their performance against an objective standard instead of through comparisons to other employees, which in this context would be likely to promote competition and undermine cohesion and civility.

Employees view these ongoing expressions of earned respect as crucial to their performance. “It’s because of that respect...that we gain confidence,” one told me. “And the more confident you become inside, the more confident you sound on the phone....So of course that brings more success and then more confidence, and it feeds on itself in a positive snowball effect.”

Identity development.

One of the most significant takeaways from my Televerde study is the importance of respect to employees’ sense of self. The workers I observed progressively saw themselves less as inmates and more as professionals. On their first day, a company leader told them that regardless of past choices, they had an opportunity to make better ones. Hearing that “wearing orange is not who you are” challenges newcomers to distance themselves from past decisions and prison life, while the foundation of owed respect makes it clear that they are viewed as having intrinsic worth. This establishes a safe environment in which they can experiment with their identities.

The women told me that the inmate experience reduces them to the least common denominator. “You’re made to feel very small; you’re made to feel like a number,” one said. Their experience at Televerde stands in stark contrast. The company doesn’t tell them to leave their old selves behind and try to fit some prototype for a successful employee; instead it encourages them to identify and build on their unique attributes and strengths. One of the first training exercises I observed helped employees determine their own dominant personality traits and see how those related to their work; the trainer explained how each trait could contribute to success. These early expressions of earned respect for diverse traits help employees envision who they might become at Televerde and as professionals more generally.

Televerde invites experienced employees to speak at training sessions. I saw employees from the corporate office stop by to share their journeys, noting that they had started in the same seats the newcomers now occupied. I observed how these concrete examples of success and growth shifted newcomers’ focus from their past selves to who they might become. In this environment, newcomers feel safe testing behaviors that might be taboo in a prison setting, and positive reinforcement from managers, coworkers, and clients gives them the confidence to grow and change. One employee said, “I’ve heard this from so many women, and I feel the same way: When

you come to work here every day, you're not in prison. You're not wearing orange....I'm an educated, intelligent professional who has intelligent, educated conversations with vice presidents, CIOs, and directors of *Fortune* 500 and *Fortune* 1000 companies on a daily basis. *That's* who I am."

Just as incivility can spiral throughout an organization, so too can respect.

Televerde may operate in an unusual context, but its employees' need for respect is universal. The impulse to improve is at least as strong as our basic physical needs, and for most of us it's a key driver when choosing an employer and engaging in a job. Few workers will experience the transformation from inmate to professional, but every worker has room to grow in subtler ways, and that growth is important to both job satisfaction and performance. Employees are more likely to feel committed to an employer that enables them to flourish and progress.

What's more, many situations in traditional companies evoke feelings not unlike an inmate's uncertainty about her worth and her intensified need for respect. Consider someone working in a low-status occupation or for a company undergoing a change in leadership that raises questions about whether employees will continue to be valued. The need for both owed and earned respect—and the validation they confer—are key factors shaping workers' attitudes and behaviors across a variety of employment situations.

Closing the Gap

In all but the most toxic workplaces, building a respectful organization does not demand an overhaul of HR policies or any other formal changes. Rather, what's needed is ongoing consideration of the subtle but important ways in which owed and earned respect can be conveyed. Here are seven small ones leaders and managers can use to make an outsized impact on workers.

1. Establish a baseline of owed respect.

Every employee should feel that his or her dignity is recognized and respected. This is especially important for lower-level workers. In a study of being valued or devalued at work, conducted by Jane Dutton (of the University of Michigan), Gelaye Debebe (George Washington University), and Amy Wrzesniewski (Yale), many hospital cleaners described seemingly subtle cues that prompted them to feel that their worth was enhanced or diminished. Some cleaners were never acknowledged

by other staff members, making them feel invisible or as though they were looking in on hospital operations from the outside. Others reported a boost in energy and worth from a doctor's simply greeting them or holding a door. Even in prestigious companies, issues of owed respect are top of mind. An Apple sales associate described his first impression of the company's CEO in a 2011 blog: "For Tim Cook there are no dumb questions. When he answered me he spoke to me as if I were the most important person at Apple. Indeed, he addressed me as if I were Steve Jobs himself. His look, his tone, the long pause...that's the day I began to feel like more than just a replaceable part. I was one of the tens of thousands of integral parts of Apple." Take a moment to consider whether your professional status is keeping you from perceiving a gap in respect, and note that simple acknowledgment or praise from a leader is often enough to make an employee feel valued.

2. Know how to convey respect in your particular workplace.

Whether we are leaders or coworkers, we can all shape an environment where colleagues reinforce respectful cues and make social worth a day-to-day reality for one another. Research points to specific behaviors that convey owed respect, such as active listening and valuing diverse backgrounds and ideas. For leaders, delegating important tasks, remaining open to advice, giving employees freedom to pursue creative ideas, taking an interest in their nonwork lives, and publicly backing them in critical situations are some of the many behaviors that impart respect.

Pay attention to norms about how to convey respect; they may vary, even from one department to another. Perhaps people in your previous workplace signaled owed respect by exchanging morning pleasantries with colleagues, but those in your new workplace would find that a rude distraction during the critical start to the workday. Or maybe in your prior environment providing both praise and critical feedback during practice sessions for client presentations was considered an expression of earned respect, but your current colleagues would see that as offensive.

3. Recognize that respect has ripple effects.

Leadership behaviors are often mimicked throughout an organization, and just as incivility can spiral, so too can respect. The cascade from the top down is also likely to shape the way employees treat customers, industry partners, and members of the community. It is no coincidence that in recent years Costco was both rated America's best large employer by *Forbes* and tied for "America's favorite retailer" in a survey by the American Customer Satisfaction Index. On the other end of the spectrum, companies at the head of "worst customer service" lists often top "worst places to work" lists as well.

Televerde operates in an unusual context—but the need for respect is universal.

4. Customize the amount of earned respect you convey.

Beyond ensuring a baseline of owed respect, leaders can identify and tailor the mix of respect types that will best enable their employees to thrive. Although it's likely that a higher level of both owed and earned respect is needed, you might have reasons to emphasize one type or the other. Perhaps you've set a goal that requires a lot of collaboration and cohesion, warranting greater emphasis on owed respect. Alternatively, if your culture focuses largely on individual contributions, you might emphasize earned respect while ensuring that performance standards are transparent and direct employees' attention to objective deliverables rather than to subjective comparisons with peers. What form might such expressions of earned respect take? According to a McKinsey global survey of more than 1,000 executives, managers, and employees, praise from an immediate manager, attention from a leader, and opportunities to head a project have more impact on motivation than do monetary incentives.

5. Think of respect as infinite.

Deciding when to bestow respect is not like making a judgment that requires dividing up a fixed pie (as when allocating time, pay raises, or attention, for instance), argue New York University's Steven Blader and Siyu Yu. Respect is not finite; it can be given to one employee without shortchanging others. This is true of both owed and earned respect: All members of an organization are entitled to the former, and all employees who meet or surpass performance standards deserve the latter. And an employee's place on the org chart makes him or her no more or less deserving of respect. Owed respect should be accorded to janitor and CEO alike, and earned respect should be based on meeting or exceeding standards specific to one's role.

6. See respect as a time saver, not a time waster.

Conveying respect doesn't necessarily come at the expense of critical tasks. Christine Porath calls lack of time a "hollow excuse," pointing out that respect is largely about *how* you do what you're already doing. Jane Dutton agrees, suggesting that owed respect is best embedded in our normal interactions and can be as simple as communicating and listening in appreciative ways, being present to others, and affirming others' value to the company. Still nervous about losing time? The small additions to your day needed to convey respect could *save* you substantial amounts of time.

Porath shows that neglecting respect can be far more costly than attending to it: Dealing with the aftermath of disrespectful behavior, she estimates, consumes seven weeks a year for leaders and executives in *Fortune* 1000 firms. The time and effort needed to recognize performance, greet others, or hold a door pale in comparison.

7. Know when efforts to convey respect can backfire.

Attempts to demonstrate respect may cause more harm than good if they are inconsistent or haphazard. Employees are likely to perceive vague expressions by HR or high-level leaders that are not enacted day-to-day by managers and peers as manipulative or disingenuous. And if people are particularly respectful in some situations but not in others—for example, if a manager offers praise only in the presence (or absence) of senior leaders—their words will probably be viewed as insincere. Finally, you should guard against earned respect that is not actually deserved; it won't resonate. One Televerde employee put it this way: "It's not like you want constant empty compliments....I'm looking to give you a valuable job." Because employees see honesty as one of the most valuable expressions of respect, insincere compliments, however well-intentioned, are likely to be counterproductive.

CONCLUSION

During her first month at work, one Televerde employee I met said that she had never held a full-time job, had no idea how to talk to CEOs, and doubted that the job could be authentically "her." Nine months later she told me about supportive peers, accomplishments on several projects, and meaningful praise from her manager. She added, "I learned something, actually, since I made that statement [nine months ago]....You are what you make yourself, so [the job] is me if I want it to be." Finding the right people for the right jobs and coordinating day-to-day operations are a manager's solemn duty. As my research shows, however, the responsibilities don't end there: Managers must also build a workplace of respect that allows employees—and, as a result, their companies—to become the best possible versions of themselves.

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