

# AXE MURDER MANAGEMENT

BY TY WOOLDRIDGE

**I LOVE MOVIES.** I especially enjoy a movie that makes me laugh. Maybe that's because there are just not a lot of things that we come across in actuarial science that are all that funny. But have you ever learned anything from watching a motion picture?

One movie that I did learn something from recently—and only because I was encouraged to watch it by a mentor of mine—is the comedy “So I Married an Axe Murderer.” The film features a talented cast including Nancy Travis, Alan Arkin, Amanda Plummer, Anthony LaPaglia and Mike Myers. But judging from how well it was received at the box office, I'll bet you haven't seen it. I was encouraged to watch the film because it has a scene in it that captures, in just a brief moment, the essence of managing people. Since October 16 is National Bosses Day, I thought I'd write about it for all those actuaries who are somebody's boss, for those who have a boss that they just want to understand a little better, and for those who want to be a boss someday.

Arkin plays the role of police captain to Anthony LaPaglia's character, homicide detective Tony Giardino. Giardino is unhappy in his job, having become a detective expecting to live the dangerous and exciting life of Frank Serpico or Dirty Harry, but finding the reality more like that of Detective Fish from the old 1970s sitcom, “Barney Miller.” To make matters worse, the good-natured Arkin is simply too nice, never expressing that he's tired of defending the young detective's

screwball antics to the commissioner. Arkin, though sympathetic, is powerless to do very much about the job. After all, paperwork is a very important part of police work and as it turns out, in this movie there is no commissioner to answer to anyway. In fact, the situation is much worse than that. A decidedly boring, nine-member committee of private citizens, “some of whom are elected and some of whom are appointed,” governs the police department by quorum.

Just a few frames later, Arkin very uncharacteristically bursts into LaPaglia's office, slams his fist on the table and begins to bawl him out mercilessly about his efforts on an axe murder case. Stunned and energized by the exchange, LaPaglia pursues the criminal with a renewed vigor, thanking Arkin profusely again and again as the story plays out.

Now, my version hardly does justice to the movie, but the message is as accurate as it is simple. If you can figure out what it is that an employee really needs from you and provide it, you will always be able to get the very best efforts out of that employee. As Arkin discovers in the movie, what an employee really needs from you may not be at all obvious, or even make logical sense to you, but it will have great meaning to the individual.

Honestly, I can count on one hand the number of actuarial supervisors that I've served in my 25 years on the job who really excelled at the business of managing people. And yet, every one of them excelled at being an actuary. Apparently

we don't always place a great deal of value on the art of leading people, but it is great leadership that our profession craves. One editorial could hardly hope to turn anyone into a leader anymore than one visit to a garage might turn someone into a car. But perhaps just one or two thoughts that were shared with me right out of this movie might start us all on a path to becoming better bosses.

First, a great boss has to understand that he or she is there for the employee and not the other way around. I recall from my own miserable, initial attempt at management that we often get this backwards. In fact, when my first employee eventually resigned in frustration, I worried more about how his leaving would impact my own career than I did about anything else.

So what is it that employees need from me or from any boss, for that matter? For some, it's as simple as showing genuine appreciation. Or it may be that they really want to be left to work independently, having you place your trust in their ability to see a job to completion. Others may want and need the structure of a task list from you. An attractive salary alone may be the ticket for others. Whatever “it” is, assuming that you can identify “it,” you can use “it” to help each and every employee thrive under your leadership.

I've discovered that the best way to find out what “it” is, is to simply ask them. Be prepared for a

blank stare or two because this will likely be a first for most employees having never been asked that question before. Ask them to tell you about the best and worst bosses they've had. Find out what they liked most about the "best" people and what they detested most about the "worst." These details will provide a great deal of insight into the things that they interpret as key boss qualities. Descriptions will differ greatly from employee to employee, so pay close attention and write the information down. Most important, don't try to interpret them because your own bias will influence how you decode what you hear.

The truth be told, the expectations of employees are often not as high or unreasonable as we may believe. Ever since I became a supervisor, I have noticed that almost any effort on my part that meets with my employees' expectations for me as their leader is received with much more enthusiasm than I would have ever expected.


Secondly, remember that people follow managers because we'll fire them if they don't; they follow leaders because they want to. Leaders understand that people want to be successful

and they want to contribute. Leaders set people up to succeed.

Every person I've ever known has innate strengths and weaknesses. Some are as much a part of us as being right- or left-handed. Asking someone to perform jobs that go against the grain of their makeup can be similar to asking them to write with their opposite hand. It can be done, but it causes stress and dissatisfaction and people will eventually gravitate back to writing with their natural hand anyway. Work to align the strengths of every team member with the jobs at hand. It's much easier than you think. Don't demand that detail personnel see the forest every day. Encourage them to learn how to see the forest, but give this group jobs that allows them to look at trees, if that's where their strengths lie.

With the added dimension of a genuine interest in their personal success comes even more insight into what they need from you as their leader. Just like Detective Giardino, most everyone will respond favorably when they believe that you are there to turn their failures into learning experiences and their successes into advancement.

Very late in the movie, LaPaglia's character, Detective Giardino, sticks his head into Arkin's office to thank him for his extra efforts only to find Arkin sitting there fretting over this whole very unnatural act. The detective's enthusiasm is all Arkin needs to reassure him that the risk he took to be a better leader was worth it. Anything new is risky, and you may have to overcome some discomfort to become a better leader, but it's worth it. Every victory will bring much in the way of rewards—for you and for your employees.

Take someone to see a movie this month. Happy National Bosses Day! 

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