



What happened at your Christmas Party?

Judith Germain

I'd like to share with you the experience of a Human Resource Manager that I know who works in a large corporation in the financial services sector. For simplicity I'll call her Ann Morrison, although that's not her real name.

Last year it had become obvious that her company needed to make rapid change if it was to survive the challenges that it faced. It had become set in its ways, determined to follow protocols and rules; it had lost its ability to innovate and failed to anticipate changes in the market. The company was lagging behind their competitors. It needed someone who could turn their IT Department round quickly and could provide the technology and expertise that the company needed rapidly. Mike was hired because he had a reputation for being the best specialist in his field, with proven experience of driving through rapid change.

It was clear from the start that Mike was different. His ideas were indeed innovative and he had a passion to succeed which was both refreshing and unerring. He pushed others hard, yelling at them when they couldn't move quickly enough and ignored all company rules to meet his objectives. The company gave him a lot of leeway because they needed him, even when the complaints about his behaviour began to trickle in. His work colleagues were beginning to feel that his demands were bullying in nature and other departments had begun to criticise his methods. The way he was working was increasing their workload and he cared little for their discomfort.

Mike was becoming increasingly difficult to manage. He had begun to realise that the company felt that he was indispensable and was using that to his advantage.

Although he exceeded his objectives and was dragging the company forward quickly in the right direction he had acquired the habit of arriving and leaving work at times that suited him, ignoring management instructions and generally causing turmoil in his wake.

Ann had spoken to his manager who had proved reluctant to tackle the problem. He depended on Mike to meet the stringent targets that had been set and he was not going to risk upsetting him. His manager felt that the turmoil that Mike was causing was more than compensated by the fact that he was achieving his objectives.

At the Christmas party Mike was approached by a colleague for whom he had very little respect and had argued with on many occasions. He was complaining about Mike's behaviour at work. Mike had felt it necessary to point out how useless and incompetent his colleague was. A fight had ensued which resulted in Mike breaking his colleague's jaw, which was why Ann was now at her desk lamenting the fact that she has just sacked the company's most talented employee. She pondered on how the situation could have been avoided and realised that it was essentially dependent on two things.

The company needed to understand their maverick and be prepared to change

Mike was deliberately hired because he was a maverick that did not fit the company culture. It is becoming increasingly common to hire mavericks to turn a company around in difficult and challenging times. They tend to be able to identify problems that the rest of the company cannot see and find innovative solutions to them.

Mavericks tend to be hugely talented but difficult to manage. They often complete targets and objectives with ease but cause enormous problems with colleagues and peers in the process. They usually display excellent interpersonal skills with customers, gaining their trust and respect, but are so mono-focused on achieving their set objectives that they are dismissive and aggressive with the people that they work with. They do not recognise that they need others to achieve their goals, which is why they tend to treat them badly or ignore them.

Mavericks need more company time spent on them than the average employee so that the company can truly harness their energy for more productive results. Mavericks want to succeed and need constant challenges as well as a firm but loose control on their activities. If they feel too stifled then they are likely to turn that energy, that passion, to more destructive pursuits, so a fine line between control and autonomy needs to be drawn.

One of the mistakes that Ann's company made was to assume that they did not need to prepare Mike for the way that the company worked, nor did they need to change the leadership style used to manage him.

Mike needed to understand the framework in which he was expected to work. Most mavericks tend to be confirmed rule breakers usually because they believe that some rules block progress and are therefore unnecessary to keep. The company needs to check if that is indeed the case. If it is, then they need to amend them, and if not, acknowledge the reasons why Mike broke the rules, explain the need for them and secure his buy-in to keep them. This is possible once he feels that his concerns have been acknowledged and the rules make sense.

Mike's manager appears to have given him an unusual amount of autonomy to complete his tasks as a trade for immunity from the company's rules. This would only enhance undesirable behaviour and potentially store up problems for the future.

The confidence to challenge the maverick

It is common for companies to allow a successful employee a lot of latitude to complete tasks. This soon becomes unsustainable if the result of this flexibility means the employee becomes disruptive towards others. Staff morale will tend to drop, staff turnover increases and sickness and overtime costs soar. The potential legal implications of the maverick upsetting other employees should not be ignored either.

Mike, such a mono-focused individual, wasn't aware that the company was upset with his behaviour,

especially as his manager appeared to condone it. Mike's manager needed the courage to see that he could change Mike's attitude to his work by modifying his behaviour. Only Mike could change his attitudes but Mike's manager could change Mike's behaviour – this alone should bring about the desired attitudinal change.

Is it not better to let employees know that they are valued rather than that they are indispensable? Mike had begun to think that he was beyond company rules and had become 'unsackable'. That explained why he had ignored company rules and felt comfortable taking an aggressive stance at the Christmas party. Gentle enforcement of those rules and discussion with him as to their necessity would have been enough for him to comply. Mavericks like Mike need to see compelling reasons to change their behaviour, for their drive will hold their behaviour where past experience has delivered success.

Mike felt that it was perfectly acceptable to treat his colleagues with contempt if he felt that they were not as competent or efficient as he was. He was confident that the company needed him to such an extent that they would excuse **any** behaviour he presented them with.

Ann considered the future of the company and decided that it was still essential to hire mavericks. She realised that it was important to engage mavericks and harness their talent in an effective manner. There was a need to provide flexibility within frameworks and to have the right managers equipped to handle the changes that mavericks bring to the workplace.

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Judith Germain has spent over 10 years working with senior executives and Board members to ensure that the business objectives were met by the effective use of its people.

In the challenging environments that she worked in, the only way this was possible was to ensure that the management teams developed effective leadership competencies that were appropriately applied. The managers had to develop their own personal brand to inspire loyalty and commitment from their teams as well as developing powerful influence and advocacy. Positional or formal authority is never enough to make lasting change happen.

Judith is the Managing Director of Dynamic Transitions Ltd. The business focuses on developing leadership talent and improving social intelligence amongst leaders. She specialises in helping senior executives manage their mavericks.

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