# Can Managers Change Their Behavior?

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Debate has raged for quite some time whether managers can really change their behavior. Proponents for the "leopards can't change their spots" stance feel that people's personalities are hard wired and it's up to others to simply accept them as they are. The other view is that while it is true that people can't change their personality, they can certainly behave differently in the workplace. Following is a case study which supports this latter perspective—just ask Larry.

**The problem**

Larry, an area manager for an upper Midwest, mid-size janitorial company, was a very competent manager in many respects, typically bringing in his accounts at or under budget. He also excelled at job start-ups and his product and equipment knowledge were the company's best. He was certified in green cleaning and often picked up additional work with entrepreneurial up-selling. On the surface he looked like a successful manager, destined to grow with the company. However, Larry had another side. He came on like a freight train. There was never a situation where he didn't have the answer. He vigorously defended his answers, rarely involving his site managers, and frequently overturning their decisions. When Larry was in this mode, he was only interested in making his own points, not listening to others. His requests of the central office staff seemed more like demands. Other's mistakes were used for blame and criticism rather than opportunities for learning. Larry was a problem.

Much of Larry's behavior was invisible to his customers, and he did a reasonably good job with their facilities. However, his site managers' turnover was unacceptably high along with the associated costs and quality problems. Something needed to be done. In addition to his field difficulties, he became a person to avoid in the office, and a frequent owner discussion topic. When people came to complain, their response was: "That's just Larry, see if you can deal with him." What were they going to do about Larry?

Over the years the owners met with Larry saying he should be nicer to the site managers. They suggested that he listen to them more often and perhaps take a Dale Carnegie course in working with people. These feedback sound bites were always soft pedaled, generously mixed in with positives. After these brief owner feedback meetings, Larry would mellow for a day or so, but fall back into the same managerial practices. The owners didn't want to push the issue as they didn't want to estrange Larry or to lose him as his jobs consistently made money.

However, while his jobs delivered financially, there were financial costs to his behavior. The company assumed direct costs such as time invested in hiring and productivity losses as each new site manager learned their role. In addition, there were the indirect costs of owner hand wringing and employee water cooler talk about Larry. Ross Blake of Retention Associates calculated that it costs 150 percent of a middle level employee's salary to replace that employee.

**A new solution**

The company decided to take another approach. Recognizing they didn't have the skills to turn Larry around they contacted an external consultant for assistance and support. Upon meeting with the owners, the consultant discovered that the feedback given to Larry wasn't specific, didn't explore the impact he was having and was delivered secondhand. He had never heard it directly from those who were most impacted by him. Finally, any consequences for not changing his behavior were not spelled out.

Following this discussion, the consultant prepared the owners for a different conversation with Larry. In this new approach, there was no soft-pedaling. Larry learned that continuing his treatment of site managers and office staff was not acceptable.

With few other options, Larry agreed to work with a consultant in an executive coaching capacity. In addition, the owners agreed to work with the coach to learn other approaches to work with Larry. For example, the owners learned to hold Larry accountable for his behavior. They now provided him direct constructive criticism that was not "sugar-coated," described the impact of his actions, and gave him specific alternatives to work with site managers. They no longer settled for his well-worn excuses of customer idiosyncrasy or supply or equipment problems. They began to provide him on-going feedback and not just during the rough moments. And they let Larry know he was on a "short leash."

At this point Larry had two sources of insight; from his coach and from the owners. However, he needed a third: the people with whom he worked every day. He and the coach initiated an assessment process, which would include receiving face-to-face feedback from his operations and office peers, site managers and the owners.

Larry then met with each group separately using a prepared set of questions and the facilitative help of the coach. He received some startling insights. The initially quite hesitant site managers stated things like, “You never involve us, you overturn our decisions, we often feel like we’re just another person for you to yell at.” With the coach helping Larry paraphrase and probe further, he then asked the site managers and other groups what he needed to do differently. And on it went with Larry learning firsthand about his managerial practices and the impact they had.

Larry now had awareness and knew what he needed to do. He developed an action plan that he shared with the owners who now provided him specific feedback on his progress.

Though Larry was suspicious of the change in style, he did eventually get it. With the owners’ constant reinforcement, a formal action plan, formal and informal feedback and continued coaching he began to operate differently, consistent with what his site managers and others were suggesting to him. He no longer was the office pariah, or the “problem manager.” Instead of possibly being let go as an interpersonal liability, Larry now proudly sports a vice president of operations title.

What was this problem manager causing?

- High turnover costs
- Lost productivity
- Tension among staff and owners
- Losses to the bottom line

What was done?

- Owner role was defined as enforcing consequences, giving constant feedback, closing off escape hatches
- Feedback process was given more strength and formalization including:
  - An assessment process to establish valid data
  - Mechanisms for Larry to understand the impact of his behavior on those around him
- An action plan that includes new approaches and new behaviors
- On-going coaching from external consultant
- More informal and frequent feedback and communication between Larry and those he worked closest with