

Positive Politics: Healthy Workplaces

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Ulla de Stricker MA, MLS



With experience since the late 70's in the information industry and in information related operations, Ulla de Stricker focuses in her engagements on strategic planning for an organization's information and knowledge management policies, practices, and delivery mechanisms including special libraries.

With a strong track record executing information audits and needs assessment studies and recommending approaches for dealing with information services and knowledge management challenges, she is a sought-after consultant and coach for library staff.

Prior to 1992, she held senior positions in the information industry in customer facing and product development roles.

Ulla de Stricker is known for her special attention to the impact of corporate culture and extrinsic pressures on the actual day to day practices of knowledge workers and frequently conducts strategic planning studies based on such practices.

Typical projects have focused on assessments of knowledge worker requirements, determination of priorities in terms of information support content and services, and structuring of underlying operations to deliver such content and services in effective ways.

Positive Politics: Healthy Workplaces



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Of all the things I did in my career ...



- ... by far the most challenging was to ensure my team looked forward to coming to work
- Luckily, I had help early on ... and I paid attention





Workplace Health is Everyone's Responsibility



- Sooner or later, we *all* get to confront the challenge, regardless of our roles
- In addition to the practical and technical aspects of our work ...
- ... how do we get interpersonal relations "right" - without going crazy?





Themes

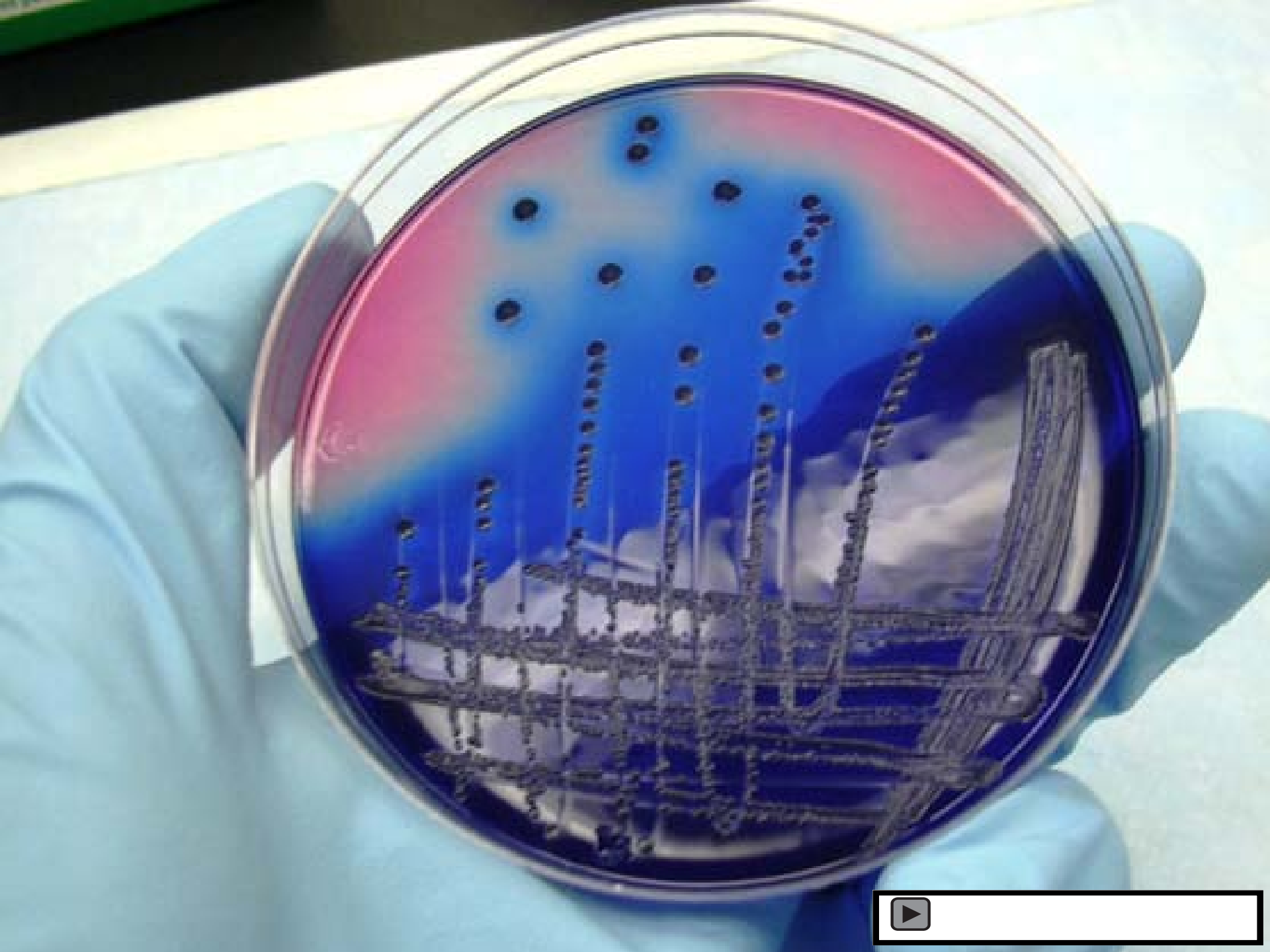


1. The Key Message: Culture Matters
2. Attitude is Paramount
3. Inspiring and Effective Leaders and Team Members Do THIS
4. Nuggets to Pack in the Bag Every Day

I'm not a psychologist ...



- But I have "seen it all"
- Workplace dynamics and interpersonal communication require careful and constant attention
- From everyone



1. Culture Matters



- The "mood" of a workplace is a critical success factor in productivity, project completions
- Untoward mood may be a reason for lack of achievement
- A leader's attention to the mood may far outweigh any skill deficit
- Mood spreads and permeates and trumps many other elements



What is Culture?



- Culture is an outcome of feedback, scope of permitted innovation, tolerance for learning curves, and more
- What got rewarded gets repeated - even though it may be an undesirable approach in view of organizational goals
- What felt bad won't be repeated - even though it was intrinsically correct and desirable for the organization

What does Culture do?



- Culture may foster rich experimentation, out of the box work, and general "why not" creative approach
- Or may stifle new thinking via risk aversion or "we always did it this way"
- Bottom line is that intrinsic merits often cannot overcome culture

So How to Build a Positive Culture?



- Careful and abiding attention to people, their interactions, and the impact of the work they do
- Awareness that seemingly innocent or insignificant comments or actions may be symptoms of matters under the surface
- Active support and reward for healthy behaviors - and immediate reaction to the opposite
 - People are more disappointed in someone who overlooks untoward behavior than they are in the "offender"



2. Attitude is Paramount



- Skills can be taught - attitude is difficult to modify
- Valuable career lesson: Hire for the attitude
- "If you cannot change the people, you'll have to change the people"

Disposition vs. Attitude



- Disposition: A feature of a person's basic personality and belief system expressing itself in interaction with others
- Attitude: How a person chooses to react to his or her surroundings and to events
- My mom is an example of a sunny disposition - always joyful, positive, warm
- If she gets REALLY indignant about something, I remind her she has a choice how she wants to react

Example



- You can sit in this traffic jam and fume, or you can enjoy the company in your car!
(Ulla, 1975, to friend who later thanked for the comment)
- The meeting was challenging and did not produce the results I was after - but instead of fretting and getting resentful I will proceed to the next necessary step

BTW: Useful Daily Reminder



- Ralph Marston's daily message (plain text or beautiful scenery if you can invest a minute) by email from
- Greatday.com
- Is outstanding value at about 4 cents/day
- I find the messages refreshing, direct, practical - check it out!

Work Attitude



- The "standard operating procedure" we apply to daily life in the workplace:
- Hm, let's see, this is different, wonder what's the best way to ...
- Wow, here's an opportunity to ...
- Oh *sugar!* Too bad, oh well, how can we minimize the potential downside of this setback and apply the lesson learned in future?

Work Attitude



- The belief system we bring to work every day:
- I am here to make a positive contribution and I give it everything I have, looking for ways I can help the department over and above my official job
- I am delighted and grateful to have the opportunity to learn and grow as I tackle the job each day
- I put in my time, but I look forward to weekends

Work Attitude



- We have all met variations of work attitude ...
- ... and experienced the impact they have



Team Dynamics - Business



- Our attitude influences the workplace in subtle but powerful ways - regardless of our position
- A good practice to ask: (Examples)
 - How am I supporting the team?
 - Are there needs I could help meet?
 - Could I volunteer something?
 - Might I start an initiative to the benefit of all?
 - How can we collectively leverage our various skills?

Team Dynamics - Personal



- Our attitude toward coworkers as people similarly influences the workplace in subtle ways
- Do my colleagues know that ... (Examples)
- I trust you all enough to be honest that I am under stress right now
- I hope you will trust me likewise
- If you tell me how it is, I will understand and be prepared to help



AKA Bringing Our Humanity to Work



- Allowing for everyone's humanity can be a powerful support to morale
- We are not robots - we have personal life challenges and they can't be checked at the door
- Not to say the workplace is a therapy group - but a little compassion goes a long way

AKA Bringing "Flowers" to Work



- Catch someone doing something right or being helpful - and point it out with thanks
- I really appreciated how you ...
- That was so helpful, thanks so much ...
- Where did you learn ... I'd like to get better at ...
- You should know it is not lost on us how you ...

AKA Bringing "Dr. Phil" to Work



- Cluing someone in can be a very helpful gesture - do not just go off and grouse privately!
- Did you know that sometimes, your extreme energy and enthusiasm may come across a bit pushy to some people?
(Personal example, my entire career)
- Had you considered that for the new staff members, procedural complexity is daunting and they need more time to learn?



But what if you are a leader?



- I have news ...
- Yes, there are special considerations for those in authority
- But we should all consider ourselves leaders



3. Inspiring and Effective Leaders do THIS



- Just my observations over 3 decades:
- Utterly simple approaches ...
- ... pack powerful punch!



Stay Out



- Give the teams a charge - and guidance
- Then let the teams work their magic
- Allow for frequent check-ins but do not micromanage
- Take any stumbles with poise and more guidance

Stay Connected



- Appear on the floor
- Pitch in if it is appropriate and welcome
- Offer input (not direction unless that's called for)
- Give guidance and provide coaching and teaching

Welcome Strange Ideas



- Overtly reward new thinking even if the specific idea did not pan out
- Make it safe and desirable for staff members to reach far beyond the "norm" (no pooh-pooh or other untoward experience)
- Provide substantive reaction to demonstrate ideas have been taken seriously and the details have been considered

Welcome Commentary and Ask for More



- Interesting ... what else can you add to help me gain insight?
- What do your colleagues think, to your knowledge?
- And if we proceed as you suggest, what do you and the team think might happen?



Make Sure to Feed Back



- Your views were presented as follows (URL or attached document) at the meeting
- The reaction was that ...
- Therefore, it was decided ...
- That said, the management team remains open to further input on the matter, esp. by way of ...
- *People value being heard more than they value getting their way*



Keep Everyone in the Loop

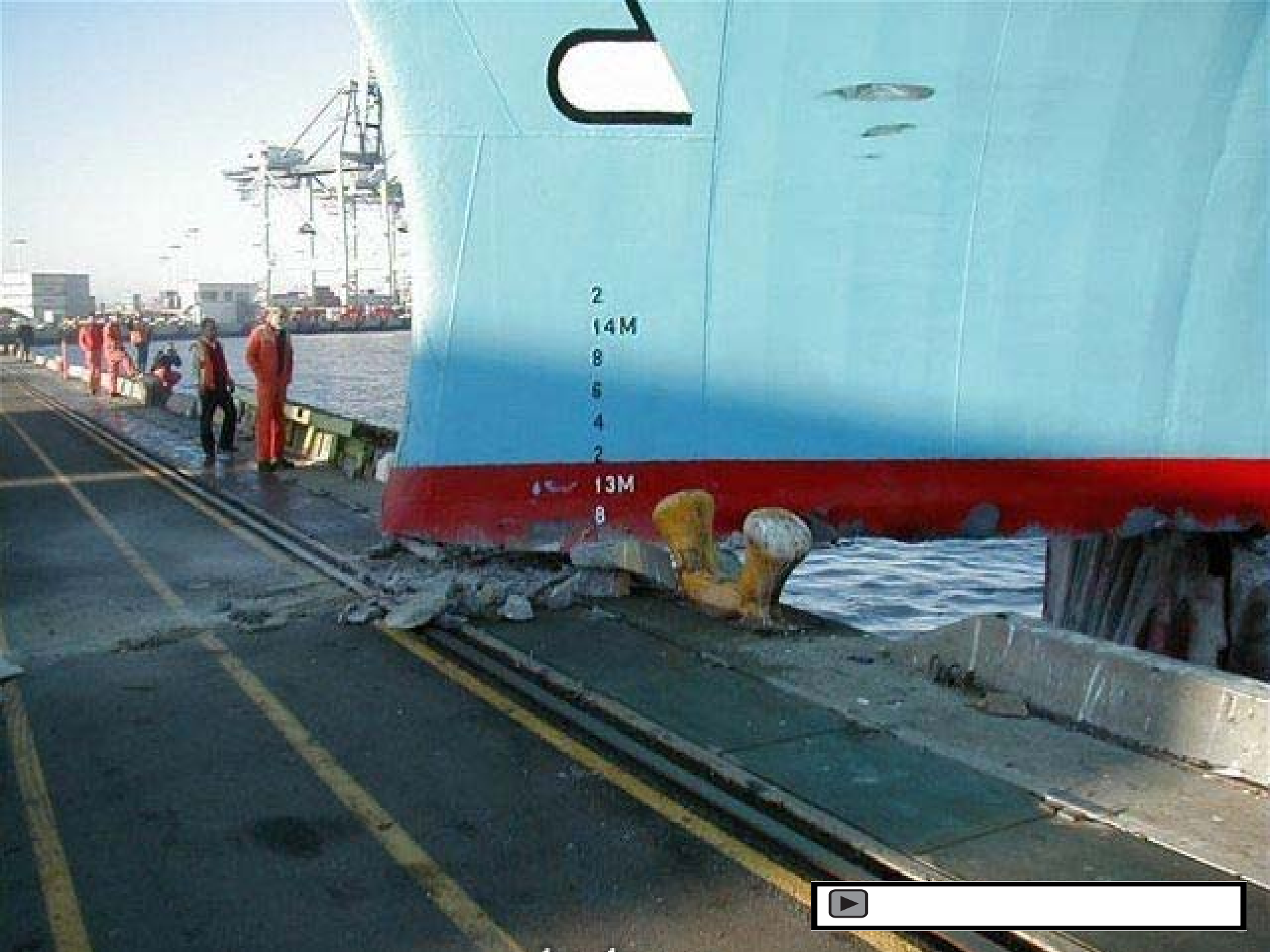


- Fill the troops in on what is going on and what the corner office thinking is
- Refer to input specifically to encourage the troops to keep offering it
- Provide background and reasons when communicating decisions - help e.g. clarify strategic vs. operational necessity

Stand Up



- For what is right
- For the team
- To extrinsic pressure
- Immediately when something needs attention



Admit Mistakes



- Teams appreciate it when managers come clean and take responsibility for decisions that may not have worked out
- In fact, honesty around mistakes tends to generate strong allegiance and respect

Praise in Public and Coach in Private



- Take the time and make the effort to single out and praise in public the work of the team members - explaining exactly what was helpful / welcome / brilliant / etc - in a meaningful, dignified way
- Support any staff member privately who may need extra attention or guidance (when you say ... it could be interpreted as ...)

Pay Attention



- You guys look stressed - anything I should know?
- Look for matters of concern before they become unmanageable
- Keep a watchful but discreet eye out at all times to ensure things are on track (avoiding being seen as "checking up")
- Make it a positive experience for staff members to raise concerns

Are Genuine and Honest



- Are not afraid to be human
- Don't fear saying "I don't have the answer"

4. Thoughts to Pack for Work



- Frame-of-mind really does frame the workday and the workplace
- But
- Since it's so easy to "lose it" when things get harried ... here are a few nuggets to keep in mind



Nuggets



- A positive approach is freely available and costs nothing to share with others
- There is usually an explanation, even for the strangest developments ... reserve judgment
- What could it look like from the point of view of other members of the team?
- What we feed, grows

Nuggets



- It isn't personal ... we may safely take our egos out of any fray and focus on what needs to be accomplished
- Time is a precious and non-renewable resource ... let's spend it wisely, on what matters
- What happens, happens ... but I want to be able to look back at my response with pride
- If in doubt, consider what option is most likely to foster sound sleep ...



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