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When Training Becomes Intimidation

What happens when the people responsible for improving performance become the reason employees stop practicing?

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Somewhere in corporate America, a group of restaurant managers was learning how to prepare a new menu item. There were photographs, detailed instructions, executive oversight, and enough scrutiny to suggest the fate of the company depended on the distribution of lettuce.

The assignment was straightforward. Prepare the product according to specifications, take a photograph, and post it in a company training chat for feedback. Managers across multiple restaurants would practice before the launch, allowing leadership to identify mistakes before customers encountered them. It was a sensible approach, at least in theory.

The specifications were detailed. The bread had to be right. The portions had to be right. Depending on the product, ingredients had to be chopped to a particular size, lettuce distributed appropriately, and cheese given sufficient time in the oven. Leadership examined the photographs closely, identifying deviations and reminding managers of the correct procedures.

The company had developed an impressively thorough system for identifying everything that could go wrong with lunch.

What it hadn't considered nearly as carefully was what could go wrong with the people preparing it.

Managers were becoming reluctant to participate. Some hesitated to submit photographs, while others avoided the practice exercises altogether. I witnessed that reluctance, and managers told me privately that they didn't want to subject themselves to another round of public criticism. A training program designed to improve execution was discouraging the very practice required to achieve it.

The irony would have been amusing if the consequences weren't so predictable.

The Difference Between Correction and Development

Standards matter. I spent years managing restaurants, and I have little patience for the notion that accountability is incompatible with treating people well. If a product is prepared incorrectly, it should be corrected. If someone doesn't understand the procedure, that person needs additional training. Customers shouldn't receive an inferior product because a manager was uncomfortable having a necessary conversation.

But correcting a mistake and developing the person who made it are not the same thing. The first addresses what went wrong. The second helps ensure it doesn't happen again. Effective leadership requires both, and the way feedback is delivered often determines whether someone leaves knowing how to improve or merely relieved that the conversation is over.

In one training exchange, a photograph of a chicken wrap prompted criticism that the ingredients hadn't been chopped finely enough. A senior leader referenced instructions from the previous day's training call and directed the team to review the preparation video. Another executive reinforced the specified chopping method.

The correction was reasonable. Nobody was suggesting that improperly prepared ingredients should become an expression of culinary independence. But there was an opportunity to do more than identify the error and repeat the instructions.

Imagine a slightly different response: The chop is still too coarse. Let's review the technique and try another one. Was there anything about the preparation that made it difficult to get the right result?

The standard hasn't changed. The mistake hasn't been excused. But the conversation now has somewhere useful to go. Instead of simply repeating what went wrong, the leader has an opportunity to understand why it happened.

Correction identifies the gap. Curiosity helps close it.

When I saw how managers were responding to the training process, I raised the concern. I thanked leadership for the feedback, acknowledged the need to keep practicing, and explained that criticism was making some employees hesitant to participate. I suggested an encouraging tone might help keep people motivated to learn.

Another general manager reacted with a heart. Senior leadership offered no response.

The people responsible for evaluating everyone else's performance had been offered feedback on their own. For once, nobody seemed particularly interested in completing the exercise.

When Training Becomes an Inspection

Public feedback isn't inherently bad. Photographs allow managers across different locations to compare results, recognize mistakes, and develop consistency. They give leaders an opportunity to identify problems early, before customers experience them.

But training and inspection serve different purposes. Inspection determines whether work meets expectations. Training helps someone learn to meet them. When leaders treat every practice attempt as a final examination, learning can become an exercise in avoiding embarrassment.

The managers I observed weren't objecting to the standards themselves. They were reluctant to expose their mistakes to an audience that included senior leadership. Their concern wasn't whether a product needed correction. It was what would happen after the photograph appeared in the group conversation.

A training program depends on people being willing to reveal what they don't yet understand. Imperfect attempts, unfinished work, and seemingly obvious questions give leaders the information they need to develop their teams. When people become reluctant to share those things, the organization loses visibility into the weaknesses it needs to address.

The photographs that are submitted may look better. The preparation may not have improved at all.

And when participation declines, management may conclude that employees aren't taking the initiative seriously enough. The response becomes another reminder, another directive, another demand for accountability. More pressure is applied to a process that may already be discouraging participation.

At some point, leadership has to consider whether the problem is a lack of commitment from its managers or the experience leadership has created for them.

Accountability Should Work in Both Directions

One of the most convenient assumptions in management is that accountability travels in only one direction. Leaders expect it from everyone else without always recognizing that they, too, are subject to it.

Employees must acknowledge mistakes, accept feedback, and change their behavior. Managers are responsible for ensuring that happens. Executives establish expectations and evaluate whether they're being met.

But what happens when the process itself needs correction?

A leader can know every procedure, identify every operational deficiency, and possess an impressive command of technical standards while still struggling to develop the people responsible for meeting them. Knowing the correct answer isn't the same as knowing how to teach it. Authority may compel compliance, but it cannot guarantee engagement or understanding.

Executives don't have to agree with every criticism they receive. Some feedback is mistaken, incomplete, or simply reflects discomfort with reasonable expectations. But considering feedback and accepting it are two different things.

When a manager raises a concern about a process, an effective leader has an opportunity to determine whether that concern reveals something worth examining. Even disagreement can clarify expectations. Silence offers considerably less.

I can't know what the executives in that conversation thought privately or whether they discussed my concern elsewhere. What I know is that the written exchange contained detailed attention to a preparation mistake and no substantive executive response to a concern about how employees were being developed.

The sandwich received a corrective action. The culture received silence.

The Standard Leaders Should Apply to Themselves

There is a legitimate argument that managers need thicker skin. Restaurant operations are demanding, customers don't grade on effort, and a manager who becomes discouraged every time someone identifies a mistake will have a difficult career. Resilience matters, particularly when decisions must be made quickly and standards maintained under pressure.

I've delivered criticism that wasn't particularly pleasant to hear. Sometimes an immediate, direct correction is exactly what's required. Not every mistake needs an extended discussion, and not every employee needs reassurance before being told what went wrong.

But resilience should help people work through challenges, not become an excuse for leaders to ignore the consequences of their own approach.

There's a meaningful difference between making someone uncomfortable because a standard must be enforced and making someone reluctant to participate in the process intended to help them meet it.

Effective leaders understand that correction and encouragement aren't competing priorities. They can identify an error without turning the person who made it into the subject of a public performance. They can insist on better results while making improvement feel possible. And when their approach isn't producing the intended outcome, they're willing to examine their own contribution to the problem.

I never expected leadership to abandon the recipe, excuse poor execution, or congratulate a team for preparing a product incorrectly. I expected something less complicated: correct the mistake, support the people learning, and remain open to the possibility that the way feedback is delivered might be part of the problem.

The company wanted managers to practice until they got it right. Some had become reluctant to practice because they were afraid of getting it wrong.

Leadership was examining the photographs for imperfections.

The more revealing evidence was in the photographs that were never submitted.