

When to Engender Fear ... or at Least a High Degree of Anxiety

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By Mortimer R. Feinberg

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Fear is making a comeback as a management tool. Or at least it looks that way on television. You may have seen the commercials. A boss's scathing glare petrifies the subordinate who telexed something in stead of faxing it Underlings sit around a conference table gulping in trepidation, awaiting their superior's arrival. A young executive's scared face fills the screen as it dawns on him that the prospect chose a competitor who is "more creative."

My generation was weaned on fear. But during the past 20 years, fear of the boss had gone out of fashion. The boss was just one of the boys (and, latterly, girls)-democratic. caring, benign and patient.

But the pendulum is swinging back. Benignity is not chic any more. However, before we start wringing our hands, let's examine the matter objectively. Is fear a useful management tool?

Yes-when it's the right kind of fear. There are two kinds of fear that are primarily caused by management style: "free-floating fear" and "focused fear."

Free-floating fear is chronic. Its victims are more or less anxious all the time-not necessarily scared of particular events or consequences, but just frightened. Workers toiling in a miasma of apprehension are always afraid of the boss, whose moods are unpredictable but whose punishment may be swift.

Obviously, in such conditions, performance suffers. One former FBI executive related to me an incident concerning J. Edgar Hoover, a world-class fear monger. One of Hoover's many quirks was his demand that no memo should exceed one "page, with wide margins. An agent ran into trouble getting his reports onto one page, so he encroached on the prescribed margin width. Hoover wrote back, "Good analysis, but watch the borders." Since no subordinate was willing to question "The Chief," the FBI dispatched agents to the Canadian and Mexican borders, to "watch." Nobody knew What they were looking for, but for a while, these borders were watched as never before.

The CEO of a giant electronics company, renowned for his outspoken impatience, became annoyed at a marketing presentation. He marked a cross next to the presenter's name. The action was noticed by the hapless speaker's superior. Next day, the presenter was fired. The CEO was startled, saying, "I didn't mean to have that happen."

These are examples of extreme behavior caused by chronic, nebulous fear. Simply stated, scared people don't think straight, and they make mistakes. It doesn't take courage to instill fear in subordinates. Or brains, either. There is always an implicit threat in the boss/subordinate relationship. The person with the power to withhold money, recognition and promotion-and ultimately the power to fire-has the capacity to inspire fear. Wallace Rasmussen, former CEO of Beatrice Foods, says, "It's easy to control by fear. It's also the most destructive and counterproductive way of managing."

However. Let's not throw the baby out with the bath water. You can use focused fear with telling effect. According to the former vice president of Burlington Industries, James Donahue, "fear cannot be a basic component in the management process. However, fear in specific circumstances does become an operative condition which the perceptive manager must understand."

The key to positive use of fear is to give the individual a way of doing something constructive to get rid of the

fear. Emanuel Kant distinguished between two kinds of despair. Those who are gripped by "depressed despair" are paralyzed by it; those in a state of "defiant despair" are willing to fight. Extrapolating from Kant, we can say that "depressed fear" is destructive, while "defiant fear" motivates people to positive action.

Here are three recommendations to consider when it is useful to engender fear, or at least a high degree of anxiety.

- **Fear as an emergency boost to performance.** Your operation faces a critical deadline. Your management style has been participatory. Your key people are used to deliberating, discussing, kicking things around. As you face them today, you can see they're ready for more of the same.

You correctly demand: "Don't talk about it. Just DO it, or else!" When you're under pressure, when you don't want innovative give-and-take, but rather concentration on detail and thorough execution of routine, use a jolt of fear.

- **Fear as a clincher in performance reviews.** The purpose of review is improvement. When people are told that their performance is substandard, they naturally get scared. Some managers go out of their way to ease such fears. According to Joel Smilow, chairman of Playtex, this is a mistake: "When fear is a reaction to an objective assessment, it's healthy and positive. People are entitled to honesty. If honesty is frightening, they will work harder to improve." The key here is to give the criticized employee a way of dispelling the fear by following agreed-on plans for improvement.
- **Fear as a stimulus to seek help for a personal problem.** A subordinate is drinking- long lunch hours, bleary afternoons, muddled performance. You know you've got to talk to him. You like the guy. You understand that he has problems. So you make your interview as gentle as possible, suggesting in a kindly way that he try to get straightened out. You don't even hint that he might lose his job, since this will only make him feel worse.

Wrong! The fear of getting fired is often the only stimulus that will break through the wall of self-justification the drinker or drug-abuser builds around his problem. As an adviser to the National Council on Alcoholism, I know the massive denial of the alcoholic. Use the threat to demand that the problem person get effective help, fast. You are being unkind if you don't employ fear in this case.

Fear has a fallout. While a threat can generate a desperately needed short-term boost in performance, it may lead to long-term resentment of the boss who caused the fear. You can help to minimize the fall out in two ways: 1) Make the fear situational, not personal-emphasize that the employee should be afraid of the consequence of his own actions, not of you as a person; 2) When the emergency injection of fear-adrenalin has done its work, offer congratulations on a job well-done and indicate the emergency is over.

It's bad to keep subordinates in a miasma of chronic fear. But concentrated doses of pinpointed fear-when accompanied by the means of overcoming the fear-can be a useful management tool. A judicious use of realistic fear-as differentiated from crippling fear-can get the results that enable you to assume the nice guy role again. Authority means power, and power can inspire fear. When necessary, use it. Otherwise, you'll lose it.

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