

Favoritism is a Huge Problem

By Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP

Playing favorites is one of the most damaging problems in any group of people. Leaders who practice favoritism in the workplace have no chance to build a culture of trust. In business schools, they teach that the antidote for playing favorites is to treat everyone the same way. But this is a trap that can cause problems because it ignores the simple fact that all people are different.

On the occasion of the death of John Wooden, the great basketball coach from UCLA, Tony Robbins re-released an interview he did with John a few years before his death. In the interview, Tony was asking how John dealt with the issue of treating some players differently from the others. John made the following remarkable statement, "treating everyone the same is the surest way to show favoritism."

The statement caught me off guard because I was always taught that we must treat everyone the same way to avoid the problem of being biased toward one person over another. John was suggesting that exactly the opposite phenomenon was happening. How could this be? To answer this question, we need to consider the nature of favoritism and its implications.

First, it is important to recognize we all have favorite people in our lives. You cannot have exactly the same feelings about different individuals. On some level, you are going to like being with or working with one person more than another. To deny any favoritism within you for other people is to deny your humanity.

So, I have favorites, but does this mean that I play favorites? I think so because I will instinctively want to slant my world conditions to be allowed to spend more time with people I like and less time with people I do not like. Then I will begin to worry that I am not treating people equally and perhaps over compensate to give preference for people I do not like as much in order to not appear biased. After a while it becomes impossible to tell if I am being fair or hopelessly partial.

Getting back to Wooden's quote, if I treat everyone the same way, I am for sure being biased because each individual is unique. The needs of different people require me to treat them differently. In order to not show blatant favoritism, I must take into consideration individual needs and do my best to treat everyone the right way. This means NOT treating everyone the same way. But then, won't I appear to be playing favorites to some outside observers. This conundrum can drive you slowly insane.

I believe there are some effective antidotes to this dilemma? Here are some simple ideas that can help:

1. Be aware of the issue of favoritism and use the word when a decision might be perceived as practicing it. Say, "I am asking George to do this budget revision again. Since I have done this in the past, I do not want to be perceived as playing favorites. George has the accounting background to do this work. If others of you would like to work with the budget, let me know and I will help you get some training so you can do it in the future."

2. Operate outside your normal pattern for some percentage of the time. This allows you the opportunity to show you are not always picking a certain person for assignments. There may be some small risk in doing this, but you can mitigate it by selecting the application to change assignments.
3. Create a culture where cross training of people is routine. In doing so, you develop bench strength, and you can demonstrate less tendencies toward favoritism.
4. Be inclusive rather than exclusive with your language when you address groups. Your choice of words will give away your feelings toward others, so always seek to use language that reflects a broad rather than narrow range of people.
5. Be alert to your own body language. We communicate more through body language than words. It is important to be cognizant of your facial expressions and posture when interfacing with all people to not project a strong bias. If you are the kind of manager who pats people on the back, make sure you do that for everyone when it is deserved.
6. Test for your own biases. Most managers are not even aware of their tendency to play favorites, so it is difficult to see the damage to trust when it is happening. Seek out a trusted individual who will tell you if your actions are being perceived as slanted toward one or more individuals. Caution: do not select one of your favorite people to solicit this information or you will obviously defeat the purpose.
7. Build Trust - with high trust, people understand the intent of actions better and can interpret complex interpersonal issues between people. If trust is low, people instinctively assume the worst intent rather than the best intent.

These actions, along with a general awareness, can mitigate the problem of appearing to play favorites. Even though as a human being you do have favorite people, you can operate with fairness and integrity if you do not try to treat all individuals the same way in every instance.

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