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HOW MATTHEW BEALE MAKES
BETTER DECISIONS BY
ENGAGING HIS EMPLOYEES
AT FUEL SYSTEMS SOLUTIONS

SMART LEADERS

Prudential Overall's Tom Watts:
You have to do what's right,
even if it may be difficult,
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The trust factor

HOW TO DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR EMPLOYEES

Interviewed by MEREDYTH MCKENZIE

Tom Watts says that the relationship you have with your employees is the most important thing you have in business.

Your employees need to be able to trust you and have confidence in you so that everyone can work together to help the business grow.

"If people don't trust you, they aren't going to follow your lead or take direction from you," says Watts, president of Prudential Overall Supply Inc.



Watts has developed trusting relationships with his 1,600 employees by keeping his promises and making sure he follows up on the things he has committed to doing. Listening to employees and then giving them feedback also helps develop those trusting relationships, he says.

Watts' commitment to developing relationships and getting to know his employees better has helped Prudential, which supplies uniforms and industrial products to companies, reach 2007 sales of \$133 million.

Smart Business spoke with Watts about how to develop trusting relationships with your employees.

Create an open culture. You do have to go out of your way and take the time and effort to speak to as many individuals as you can. Whenever we're in one of our plants, we try to make sure that we talk to as many people as we can.

We'll walk the building and say, 'Good morning or afternoon,' and just basically talk to people so that there's somewhat of a comfort level for people to be able to talk to us. I also talk to the local management and try to get information about some of our people, so when I am out on the workshop floor or out with our employees, I can say something that they can relate to — either something about their personal life, a child or school or something personal — try to bring that up so that they at least know I know a little bit about them, and again, that breaks down some of the barriers.

You have more open lines of communication, you hear more about situations that are going on, if people are comfortable enough to take the time and communicate with you. You can head off problems, and you can hear their thoughts and concerns out in the field.

Make the right decision. You have to do what's right, even if it may be difficult, costly or unpopular in some cases. When you do certain things or make decisions and communicate with everybody, you should give them the reasons why, so people understand. If you do that, they're more inclined to accept and follow any rules and regulations or decisions.

You have to be consistent. You can't change with the times. Regardless of what the current climate is or financial situation, you have to maintain consisten-

cy at all costs. People know that if this situation arises, you're going to react the same way no matter who's involved or what the situation might be. It's within each individual; you either want to be consistent and treat people fairly all the time or you don't.

Listen to your employees. It's an open communication situation — I listen to them, hear their side and listen to their situation first before I give a response, feedback and make a decision.

You have to focus on them. I try to take notes while they're talking. I usually tell them in advance [that] I'm going to make some notes so I don't forget, which leads most people to know that what they're saying must be important if we're taking notes.

or why a certain situation was handled the way it was. For the most part, if people understand the reasons, they're more inclined to accept the results or decisions.

Don't underestimate what your people understand. They understand maybe more than what you think they do. Sometimes we, as managers, think, 'Well, we know certain things, and our employees may not know it, so I'll just give them a brief, cursory answer,' and that's not the case. People do understand, and even if they don't, they appreciate the fact that you made every attempt to give them all the information that you can.

I don't believe in secrets. The more information you give them, the more people are apt to buy in to what you're trying to accomplish.

"You have to do what's right, even if it may be difficult, costly or unpopular."

By referring to the notes, I can make sure that I answer all of the details, questions or concerns. I try not to have disruptions, although generally interruptions do come in.

The bottom line is, look at them face to face, acknowledge what they're saying, and then make notes. And then, frequently, you need to respond back to them — 'OK, as I understand, you're saying this,' to give them the feedback that you heard what they're saying, and you just want to make sure, clarify or make absolutely certain that you understand what their concern was.

Give employees all the information they need. You have to give them all the information that is needed for why a decision was made

I usually ask a lot of questions. There's an old management philosophy that says, ask the same question three different times, maybe three different ways, and that enables you to hear three different answers on the same question or concern. You get better information, more detailed information and maybe a better chance at getting to the root cause. Sometimes the first statement is not necessarily the root cause or problem of any concern, but if you ask why three times, three different ways, you're more inclined to get that root cause and get down to the core of the concern, and you have a better chance of resolving the problem or understanding what the concern is that employees have brought in. <<