

How Respect Can Set Inmates (and Employees) Free

Respect and a sense of encouragement transform workers' identities.

Organisations can have very different work environments, including differences in the respect they give to employees. Organisational cultures differ, and managers differ, in whether they see employees as valuable and how well they acknowledge this. Many organisations think that it makes a difference – notice how I used the word “employee”, but actually words like “colleague” and “team member” are frequent in actual work. Does this matter?

For an example of how much this can matter – in a very special context – a recent **paper** in *Administrative Science Quarterly*, by Kristie Rogers, Kevin Corley and Blake Ashforth, looked at an organisation that employs incarcerated women at a state prison to work in marketing call centres part-time. Every day inmates go to work in their orange jump suits (yes, just like in the TV series, *Orange Is the New Black*). Every day they go back to the prison wing after working. But this work is not like the demeaning chain gangs that we see in some old movies; the employer, Televerde, values its inmate workers and gives them both encouragement and respect.

Viewing the inmates as valuable individuals deserving of a chance at business success has resulted in drastically lower recidivism rates, as well as industry-leading performance for the organisation. The research reveals a relationship

between the respect received and individual transformation.

A sense of identity

The respect the inmates got from their Televerde managers, and from customers, changed their lives. The positive feedback and encouragement based on the value of the work they do, and their performance, gave a sense of excitement and self-respect. They also felt general respect from being seen as real people with lives and accomplishments, which contrasted with their identities in “the yard”, inmates with orange jumpsuits and numbers, which gave them a sense of a changed and improved life. “Here we’re people, in the yard, we’re inmates,” said one call centre worker. Together, these two kinds of respect, and especially the general kind brought about by simply being part of something important, put the inmate-workers on a path toward removing themselves from their identities as current and future inmates. The women were able to attach themselves to a new identity as a professional doing legal and respected work outside of prison.

Data showed that encouraging distance between the inmate identity and other identities was a critical part of the socialisation process. Such encouragement started at the lowest levels, with inmates asked to write their actual names on their training documents. New hires sometimes

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accidentally wrote their inmate identification number, illustrating how at first they had a difficult time seeing who they were outside of the orange jumpsuit.

Encouraging individuals

Changes happened impressively fast. Over a period of less than a year, even less time for most, changes were evident even though the Televerde workers remained in the prison wing with their old friends every day after their journey, the women transitioned from their old thinking habits – a new way of seeing civil society that they could not yet reach because it was outside the prison walls.

In the Televerde training manual for new hires, the “employees” were asked “what are you willing to do to avoid returning to prison? While you are a Televerde employee, this is a question we will ask you to consider”. They were also given the building blocks of a new identity through a personality inventory and learning style assessment. By helping the women to positively interpret the results, such as in the phrase “I lack patience which makes me an excellent multitasker,” they heard the message that they were individuals who were respected by Televerde.

These small but significant trappings of daily work at Televerde helped the workers not just see their inmate identity and their worker identity as separate beings coexisting in their minds; they also could shift to a new and holistic identity that would guide their lives after they were released from prison.

Giving workers respect is also important in regular organisations, with no inmate workers, but there is a certain degree of cynicism about its effect, and there are also managers who don’t think it matters. After seeing how transformative it can be under these conditions, it could be time to reconsider it outside of the prison walls.

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