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Leader as Coach: Restoring Employee Motivation and Performance (A)

Kiera lay on a gurney in the emergency room of Piedmont Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia. As she tried to reconstruct the events of the last three hours, she hazily recalled collapsing in pain outside her hotel room door and one of her colleagues from Safety Supply Company taking her to the hospital. Her head ached and she still felt terrible, but the intravenous fluids she had been given immediately on arrival had started to ease her symptoms.

When the doctor came to her bedside, they had good news: Kiera had had a kidney stone, but it had passed. After a few more hours of hydration, she would be discharged from the hospital. However, there was bad news, too: the doctor told Kiera she would need to slow down and alter her lifestyle or risk ending up in the hospital again.

It was February and Kiera had been in her new position for just ten months. She was only 29 years old, but she felt tired and worn out all the time. When she found herself thinking “At least I didn’t collapse during my presentation at our annual meeting this afternoon,” she knew she had to make some changes.

A Good Start

Kiera landed a job in guest services at a university in downstate Illinois after graduating with a bachelor’s degree. Guest services provided staffing for campus events to maintain crowd control while helping to ensure a high-quality guest experience. Gradually, she took on more and more responsibility in the department and ultimately spent two years working as an event manager. Her

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attention to detail and commitment to guest satisfaction fit perfectly with her job coordinating staffing and security at sporting events, concerts, and shows. She prided herself on never receiving a request that she could not fulfill. As a result, it seemed she needed to be everywhere at once—and somehow, she was; her fitness app registered over ten miles on most event nights.

Just after her third anniversary with guest services, and on her 25th birthday, Kiera met with Joe Klein, who sold emergency and safety supplies to the university. He represented Safety Supply Company, which provided everything from first aid kits and fire extinguishers to active shooter field kits and automated external defibrillators. Joe thought Kiera was the kind of high-energy person his company needed on its sales team. After conferring with his boss, Joe invited Kiera to apply for a sales position in the Chicago area. Kiera saw the opportunity as a way to build new skills and as a natural progression in her career from running events to helping clients prepare for them.

She was hired after an extensive interview process that included a drive-along with a seasoned member of the sales team. Working in sales offered Kiera a level of freedom she had never experienced with the university: no one tracked her activities in the region as long as she met her targets and called on each customer at least once every two months. Plus, with almost no evening and weekend hours, she and her husband Thomas had more time together and could start talking about having children. They had known each other for five years, since meeting in college, and were married right after graduation. Thomas was supportive of Kiera's career and felt just as excited as she for this new opportunity.

A New Assignment

Kiera's energy level and performance as a sales rep exceeded expectations at Safety Supply Company. After three years of outstanding results, she was promoted to sales manager in Dallas, Texas, reporting to Rudy Lopez, regional manager for the southern United States. She was gratified that she was building a successful sales management career, but she also felt the promotion showed that the company recognized she had the skills and experience to progress even further.

Rudy, 47, had worked his way up through the sales organization at Safety Supply Company. He often told his sales managers he had learned everything the hard way by doing it himself, but he felt that experience made him a better boss. He knew Kiera had some learning to do, too, but he was confident her energy and stellar sales record would help her figure it out. Because she had been promoted from within the organization, Rudy gave her only minimal onboarding, reasoning, "She knows the drill."

Kiera and her husband moved to Dallas in April. They quickly found an apartment, and Kiera settled into her new office. She now supervised five salespeople and was responsible for staff development, quarterly sales reports for Rudy, special projects, and annual meeting presentations. She dove into her new responsibilities by reviewing the client files and sales reports. She found that overall results were fine, but performance was uneven among her team members. She would need to figure out why.

Then she looked at the sales training materials. The printed materials were at least 15 years old, and the videos were so outdated they were unusable. All of it needed to be updated. Kiera decided she would create more interactive materials and reshoot the videos as her first special project. She reviewed the idea with Rudy, who said with a laugh: “Really, that’s your first project? Well, if you think you have the time, go for it!”

Three months later, Kiera had written new scripts and hired a videographer. She asked her team members to “star” in some of the new videos, which she directed. She hired an editor, with whom she worked closely to bring the new content and video together. While Kiera was editing videos at home late one night, her husband pointed out that she was working a lot of evenings and weekends again. But the project was worthwhile, she thought, and she was confident it would eventually get company-wide attention. Besides, her team was working hard, and most of them were making their numbers, so she felt optimistic. Everything seemed fine.

Expanding Her Role

In October, Kiera received a call from Barbara Wilding, the company’s corporate events manager. “How would you like to help us organize the regional meeting in Dallas scheduled for January? I hear you have some experience with this sort of thing.”

Kiera was excited. “Of course, I’d love to help!” she replied.

“Great,” Barbara said. “Talk to Rudy, and if he agrees, we can get started.”

Kiera sent an email to Rudy that afternoon:

Hi Rudy,

Barbara Wilding and I just had a conversation about my helping coordinate the regional meeting in January. This is the perfect opportunity to blend my skills in event management with what I know about Safety Supply Company. My team is doing a great job—we’re making our numbers. And the video project has just another month or so of editing before it is ready for final review by corporate. That will leave me a window to work on the meeting, which would be an exciting project. I can do this. Barbara said with your OK, this is a go. What do you think?

By the way, did you see we landed the Chili’s account?

Kiera

Rudy called her a few hours later, sounding a little annoyed. “Are you sure you have the bandwidth for this?” he asked. “I need you to focus. The video project is nowhere near done. It is almost definitely going to need further editing after corporate looks at it. Legal alone will have to justify their existence with *some* changes. How are you going to manage the regional meeting on top of that?”

Kiera had her answer ready. “The hard part of the video project is done, Rudy. Yes, there will be edits, but I can squeeze those in this fall,” she responded. “And remember, I can organize events with my eyes closed. This is where I came from. And technology means I’m never far away from my staff even when I’m not in the office. Barbara’s staff will be on this project, too. I really want to do it.”

Rudy sighed and replied, “As long as you don’t drop the ball on your other work, I’m not going to stand in your way.”

Kiera flew to Portland, Oregon, to attend the regional meeting, talk to company organizers on the ground, and get ideas for the Dallas meeting.

Fatigue and Frustration

By the end of January, the regional meeting in Dallas was over. It had taken a lot of Kiera’s time, but in the end, it was a great success. However, the training video project was still not finished because of the large number of edits required after the corporate review. During one of her few full days in the office, Kiera heard some of her salespeople complaining about Maya, one of the more experienced members of her team. Maya’s sales had been down, and she had been noticeably absent from Friday afternoon meetings, which meant the other members of the team were missing out on her product and client know-how. Kiera would have to deal with that later.

However, what occupied Kiera’s thoughts was not the overdue videos or Maya’s performance. She was thinking about her first presentation at the annual company meeting in Atlanta in February. By the week before the meeting, she was spending all day working on it, ending with an all-night session before she boarded her flight. “I’ll sleep on the plane,” she told herself.

As she sat in the airport, Kiera was not feeling excited about the presentation; rather, she was worried about being criticized. She had heard that executives at corporate (who were the cause of the extensive edits to her training videos) did not support her video project. Apparently, they felt she was displaying too much ego and not paying enough attention to her core concern, which was sales and her sales team.

Kiera felt so tired. Why was Rudy not protecting her from some of this criticism? She felt like she had been making her way alone ever since she had arrived in Dallas. She was working as hard as she could, but she was getting little support or guidance from her boss.

What Now?

At the hospital, Kiera’s mobile phone was ringing beside her on the gurney. It was Rudy. “Kiera, are you all right?” He sounded genuinely concerned. After Kiera explained, he said, “Take a few days off before coming back to the office. When you get back, we need to talk about what happened.” Was Rudy going to fire her or give her a pep talk? She was too tired and discouraged to care. “Maybe this isn’t the right job for me anyway,” she thought as she closed her eyes.

Kiera met with Rudy after taking a few days off to recover from her kidney stone episode. He started the meeting by asking questions. “Why did you tackle a corporate-wide project as soon as you got to Dallas? What were you thinking, taking on a regional meeting before you even got to your first anniversary? What were you trying to prove?”

When Kiera responded, she expressed the frustrations she was feeling. She felt all the work she was putting into the training videos was unappreciated. She thought she was being unfairly criticized by corporate. She was upset that Rudy was not supporting her more. Why wasn’t he even talking to her about sales, which seemed to be corporate’s main criticism? And what about the Chili’s account? Was anyone paying attention to anything she was doing?

After Kiera finished talking, Rudy felt exasperated that she did not seem to understand that she needed to focus her energy on her team. Finally, he hit on the idea of Kiera hiring an outside coach, proposing it as a way to help her get a new perspective on the situation. Although she felt unsettled after what felt like an unproductive conversation, when Rudy offered to cover half the expense per company policy, Kiera agreed.

Working with a Coach

After some research, Kiera decided to work with Belinda Garcia, a former telecommunications executive and International Coaching Federation–certified coach. During their first meeting, Belinda described the coaching process, determined the logistics of the coaching arrangement, and worked with Kiera to determine some general goals for coaching around prioritization and how to best manage up. Next, Belinda asked Kiera to describe the current situation. After listening to the whole story, from the move to Dallas to the emergency room in the Atlanta hospital, Belinda asked, “How do you feel about going back to work?”

Kiera took a deep breath. “Not good. I feel a knot in my stomach every time I think about going back to the office. I get a little nauseated when I think about those training videos. I don’t understand how they became so controversial! And now that I’ve been out of the office, the work is piling up. My last quarterly report was due weeks ago, and I’m still working on it.”

Belinda remarked, “Let’s see if I have this right. You have a knot in your stomach and feel nauseated—it seems that work is giving you a lot of stress.”

“Yes,” Kiera replied with an exasperated sigh.

Belinda gently asked, “In what way can I support you right now?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t know. I’m not sure I even want to stay in this job,” Kiera said. “I’ve been trying so hard, but it seems like Rudy and corporate think I’m really screwing things up—and I don’t even know what I did wrong!”

Belinda said quietly, “I’m noticing a lot of emotion here.” Kiera could feel the tears coming. Belinda asked, “Do you need a moment?”

Kiera took a deep breath. “No, that’s OK,” she said. “I didn’t realize how much this was getting me down.”

Once Kiera collected herself, Belinda asked, “Do you really know what Rudy expects from you, in terms of what success looks like and how it’s measured?”

Kiera thought for a moment. “Obviously, our sales numbers are the most important measure,” she replied. “But after that, I guess I’m not sure what his expectations are—or if anything else is even being measured!”

Kiera repeated her feelings about the training materials, the paperwork, and most of all, her meetings with Rudy. He always seemed impatient or frustrated with her. “Why is that?” Kiera asked. “Am I missing something?”

“I don’t know,” said Belinda. “It sounds like you have a lot of questions and need to get some clarity.”

“I guess you’re right,” replied Kiera. “I need to go back and talk to Rudy.”