

# Building a Foundation for Good Relations with Employees

---

Written by Steve Jones

The topic, “Building a Foundation for Good Relations with Employees” is part one of a two-pronged training approach that we utilize at the company where I work. We call this the proactive approach, or **preventive medicine**. The second part of this training is “How to Handle People Problems.” This is considered **reactive medicine**. The value of the proactive approach is that when it’s done effectively, it greatly reduces people problems and the need to administer the **reactive medicine**.

I’ve worked for my employer for 23 years. Eighteen of those years I spent working in the human resources department. My first position with the company was a machine operator. I had Japanese trainers. We called them mentors, or sensei, in Japanese. They used what is called the TWI training method, which stands for Training Within Industry. I’m a firm believer in the effectiveness of the training methods developed by the TWI Institute. I also believe in the value of the Anabaptist Financial training seminars, which allow us to learn from and network with like-minded people. It’s wonderful when we can assist each other with problem solving methods that are biblically guided, and help each other through our business struggles.

One of my first questions for business owners is, “What should your foundation be comprised of in a Christian business?” At our company we have what we call **guiding principles**. I feel it is very necessary as Christian business owners to have a set of guiding principles. Whether you’re young and starting a business, or have an established business, I encourage you to write down your set of

guiding principles. They will help your business operate in a Christian way, resulting in more satisfied customers, and helping your business prosper. Where I work we also have what we call BOS, which stands for **Business Operating System**. Each month we meet and discuss how the business is operating. We talk about different parts of the business, such as lean operations, employees, etc. If you don’t already have them in place, I strongly encourage you to develop both guiding principles and a business operating system.

---

**Once you see beneath the surface,  
you find out people are all alike.**

---

Another part of a business’s foundation is employees. When I think of employees, I think of people. When you have 330 employees, there will tend to be people from about every culture you can imagine. We have Caucasians, African Americans, Vietnamese, Chinese, Muslims from Yemen and Egypt, Hispanics from Mexico and Puerto Rico—people from many different cultures. When you put that many people, from that many cultures together, working elbow to elbow, you’re going to have problems. However, there’s one thing I’ve found that holds true. All of these people have four things in common. They have a heart, they have a soul, they have feelings, and they desire to feel valued by other people. A phrase we teach from the TWI material is, “Once you see beneath the surface, you find out people are all alike.” I’ve found that to be true.

At the company I work for, we train our people to always be conscious of the “5 M’s” – Man, Machine, Material, Method, and Measurement. I tell the coordinators and leaders, “If you will pay close attention to these five items, and take care of those needs, you will be set to go.” Using the 5 M’s, the first thing you’ll do when you come into work is take a head count to make sure all your employees are there. If someone is missing, you’ll need to adjust the workflow or find a substitute. Check the machines to ensure everything is working efficiently and safely. How is the material? Do you have sufficient material for the scheduled production, and is the quality acceptable? Are all employees using the correct work method to minimize errors and accidents? Are results being measured to identify possible problems?

No matter how many good machines you have, how sophisticated your technology is, or how effective your methods and measurements are, if you don’t have the Man element, you have nothing. You need engaged and happy employees if your business is going to be truly successful.

---

## You need engaged and happy employees if your business is going to be truly successful.

---

So how do we retain our work force? One powerful tool I’ve found is giving recognition. People love to be recognized, and often it only takes a minute. I’ll share an example of how I give recognition. The first thing I do every morning (when third shift workers are being replaced by first shift workers) is check what we call the “attainment boards” in every work cell. The workers in every cell have hourly production goals. When they meet their goals they record their production in green. If they exceed their goal they record their production in blue. If they don’t meet their goal they record it in red, and include an explanation of why they missed the production target. Every morning when I check the attainment boards, if I see that someone met their goal I’ll write “Good Job - SJ” (my initials) next to their numbers. It’s interesting—if I miss a day I’ll usually get stopped the

next day and asked, “Where were you? I hit my numbers yesterday and you didn’t leave me a note.” Or, sometimes people ask me why I never leave them a note. I ask them if they’ve hit their numbers. They say, “Well no, but I try hard.” I then tell them that I’ll keep checking on them, and once they hit their numbers I’ll leave them a note. It only takes a couple of minutes, and it can be made especially meaningful by attaching their name to it. For example, if I know Bob met his goals I’ll write “Good job, Bob,” and the next shift will work like crazy so they can do just as well as Bob.

Another important part of retaining employees is respect. Everyone wants to be respected. If we can’t respect the other person, how can we expect them to respect us? I tell my wife and children that in order to be respected, we need to be respectable. I try to encourage managers in the company to earn respect. I tell them, “You know, you weren’t really too respectful to that person. I realize that they are an hourly associate and I realize that they messed up. But you still need to speak to them with respect in your voice, because you can win them over if you do.”

An important way to create mutual respect in a company is to promote two-way communication and listen to ideas from employees. This is important. Many times the flow of information in a business goes from the top to the bottom. Owners and supervisors need to communicate to the workers, but it’s not a one-way street. If your company has mutual respect, then information and ideas need to be flowing both ways. Listen to your employees’ suggestions. They are probably your greatest source of money-saving ideas. They are just waiting for you to ask them. If there is a quality problem or a machine problem, they are probably best equipped to help you solve the problem since they are very familiar with the process or machine. If you notice a problem or if an employee brings a problem, ask him, “What do you think?” Listen to their ideas. If an employee has a good idea, implement it as soon as possible. If your employees realize that you’re using their ideas, they will feel valued, and will probably work hard to develop more good ideas. Ideas and suggestions from your workers are a great source of improvement for a company. One of my Japanese mentors told me, “Steve, you never think that a small idea is not worth anything, because a small idea is like a kernel of

rice. It's very small, but if you take one million kernels of rice, you have a big pile."

Another way to increase employee satisfaction and thereby improve employee retention is making sure that the employee's equipment and tools work well. I learned this from a conversation I had with an employee. It was soon after my employer's annual pay increases were awarded. An employee stopped me and said, "You know Steve, I could do without a raise if the company would just fix my machines. They are always acting up." Equipping employees with reliable equipment not only increases production, but can also increase employee morale by avoiding unnecessary frustrations and distractions. Another way to increase employee morale is to give them a suitable work environment. Employees may not specifically mention this, but they will appreciate a clean and orderly work environment.

I strongly recommend that you monitor the cleanliness and general maintenance of two specific non-work areas—the break room and restrooms. Would you want to sit and eat your lunch in a place where the tables are dirty, ceiling tiles are hanging down, and it's evident that no one has cleaned the corners for at least a year? Let me tell you a story to illustrate this point. A company that makes automotive parts wanted to get Toyota's business, so they invited some people from Toyota to come take a tour of their plant. One of their guests from Toyota happened to be a woman, and she asked to use their restroom. She came back out and said, "We're not doing the tour." The plant manager asked, "What do you mean you're not doing the tour?" She said, "The third stall door has no latch. If you don't think any more of your employees that you can't keep your restroom doors fixed, you won't be making quality parts for us. So we're not taking a tour and we are not purchasing from you." Out the

door they went. The opportunity was lost.

The quality of supervision directly impacts employee satisfaction. Every supervisor has five needs—two of them are knowledge and three are skills. First, a good supervisor should have *knowledge of the work*—how to effectively do the job. Otherwise, it's just the blind leading the blind. The second need is for *knowledge of responsibilities*. Responsibilities need to be defined so that work can be effectively allocated, and so nothing gets overlooked or done twice. (Job descriptions are a great tool to meet this need.) The third need is *skill in improving work methods*. The fourth need is a *skill in leading*. Supervisors need to develop and cultivate effective leadership styles. I sometimes use the comparison of sheep and goats. Sheep can be led, but goats need to be driven or pulled. We all want employees that, like sheep, can be led instead of driven. However, employees will not be willing to follow unless they trust the leader. The fifth necessary need is *skill in instructing*. Supervisors need to be able to effectively pass on their knowledge and skills to the workers around them.

Let's focus for a minute on the fourth skill—the skill in leading. This is foundational for both good relationships and a successful business. I believe that a good leader gets people to do what needs to be done, when it should be done, the way it needs to be done, because they want to do it, and they want to do it the way you instruct them. Let me illustrate with a story. Several years ago we were having a bi-annual operations audit, where an audit company comes in and looks at all of our records, top to bottom, inside and out. I was called to the conference room because the head auditor wanted to talk to me about our training records. I was nervous because I was pretty sure she didn't just want to pat me on the back and say, "Everything is fine." After introducing myself, she said, "I have a concern. I have a question for you. I was in one of your work cells looking at training records, and I could not find any validation of training in the records. Your employee never signed the records to acknowledge that the training was done. Can you explain that to me?"

After reviewing the records, I realized that the person was in the process of training, but hadn't signed the acknowledgment yet because the training was not finished.

### HOW TO RETAIN YOUR EMPLOYEES

- 1 | Give recognition
- 2 | Promote mutual respect
- 3 | Provide reliable equipment
- 4 | Maintain non-work areas
- 5 | Encourage quality supervision

I explained that to the auditor and asked if there was anything else. She said, “Yes, there’s one more thing. I have found that if your people know why they need to do a job in a particular way, they will be compliant. It’s when your people don’t know why they’re supposed to do something in a particular way that they start to do it their own way, because it might be easier or quicker.” She encouraged us as a company to always make sure that our employees know *why* they need to do things in a certain way. This is why the skill of leading is important. Leading involves getting people to do what needs to be done, when it needs to be done, in the correct sequence, with the correct level of quality, and also because they want to do it.

Machines come with an owner’s manual; people don’t. When you acquire a machine, you often have a technician to help with setup and initial training. How many times have you hired someone and they said, “Oh by the way, here’s my owner’s manual; this will explain how I tick?” It just doesn’t happen. And yet, every human being is far more complex

---

## **It can be helpful to think about the complexity and uniqueness of people from four different angles—*work, background, health, and family.***

---

than any machine we’ll ever use in our business. Even in my company, where we use some very complex robotic units, they never approach the complexity of people.

It can be helpful to think about the complexity and uniqueness of people from four different angles—work, background, health, and family. Each person will have a different view of their work, and what is expected and acceptable in the workplace. People come from all different types of backgrounds and families. At the company where I work, we have people from many different cultures, and I enjoy trying to learn their languages and dialects. I’ve found that there are significant differences even within specific cultures and language groups.

Health can affect a worker tremendously. You can have a person that is healthy one day, and then all of a sudden he finds out he has a health issue, and he is not the same person. He cannot leave that problem at home. Or, if a family member has health issues or other problems, the employee is bringing that baggage to work with them. This will affect their work.

Sometimes our employees are slow learners. However, an employee who learns slowly can become the most dedicated employee. I’ve worked with employees who have been with us for years. We know them well, and we know that we can only teach them one thing at a time. It requires us to be patient, patient, patient with them. But those people—when they’ve got it, they’ve got it. And when they’ve got it, they give everything they’ve got.

People must be treated as individuals, always. One time when I was still in HR we had an employee that went against the standards of conduct. This employee was not my favorite person; in fact, I considered him a thorn in my flesh. The human side of me was mentally rubbing my hands together and thinking, “Wow, just what we need to get rid of this person.” One of my mentors, the VP of HR, said, “I want to give you some advice. Who is your favorite worker in the whole plant? Okay, would you terminate the person that you like if he had done the same thing?” I said, “No.” He said, “You need to start putting a blue dot over their faces. Look at the situation, not at the individual.” A similar lesson I learned was to practice the three F’s: Be Fair, Be Firm, and Be Friendly in all things that you do with your employees. If you are consistently fair and treat everyone equally, if you’re firm and yet friendly at the same time, your employees will respect you for that. It will also encourage them to do their best to follow the standards of conduct.

It’s important to let each worker know how he is getting along. They need to understand the expectations of their position, the responsibilities, quality of work, etc. It’s important that when you hire an employee you sit down with them, welcome them to the company, explain the job responsibilities, quality of work, behavior, etc. Having an employee handbook and a written job description to review with them is very useful. The key is to communicate clearly and early your expectations for the employee. The

sooner they know what's expected, the sooner they can start delivering results that meet your expectations.

After communicating job responsibilities and your expectations, follow up in the future by helping them identify ways to improve their skills and behavior. None of us are perfect. Some people are very skilled, but need coaching to develop appropriate behaviors, while the reverse is true for others. Schedule a regular time to review an employee's skills and behaviors (performance reviews). If you notice something worthy of praise, or something that needs correction, invest a minute to stop and help the worker by offering reinforcement or correction.

When correction is required, use the sandwich approach. Start with something positive about the employee, communicate the need for improvement, and then conclude with something else positive about them. One of the first things I learned in manufacturing is to praise in public and discipline in private. If Joe does something right, praise him out in the shop where his co-workers can hear: "Hey Joe, good job. Thanks a bunch. We really appreciate it." If correction is needed, don't do it in front of his co-workers. It's demeaning, and it's not constructive. Talk to Joe privately and say, "Joe, I have a concern. First off, I want you to know that I really appreciate how hard you try for our company. You're here every day. You're here on time. You don't cause any problems with your co-workers. However, I do have a concern. Recently, I've noticed that some of your work has not been at the level we expect, and it's the sanding portion. Your sanding is not complete. I would like to show you again how this panel has to be sanded so we don't get any complaints down the line from the consumer. I know you're going to help me out with this because

of your solid history with the company." Start out with the positive, sandwich in the concern, and close with something else positive.

It's important to give credit when credit is due. Look for extra or unusual performance. Tell the person right away, while it's still fresh. Recognition is like donuts: best when fresh. If someone performs their duties beyond your expectations, take time to recognize their actions and thank them, even if it's a small thing. It only takes a minute, and recognition is very powerful. If you notice Joe giving extra effort, recognize him by saying, "Joe, I really appreciate you staying over to help me get this shipment out the door. I couldn't have done it without you." The next day Joe will be back and he will be trying harder to please you than he did the day before. Don't wait a week and then say, "Oh, by the way, last week you stayed over..." By that point it's stale.

Tell people in advance about changes that will affect them. If possible, explain why the changes are necessary. People are more willing to accept changes if they know the reason. Work with them and be supportive if the changes are difficult.

We had an interesting case of poorly-executed change at the company where I work. We have four large buildings that are combined. We decided to try a new fan system for ventilation, and brought in a huge prop fan, bigger than any fan I'd ever seen. It was mounted on the ceiling, and was so powerful that it would blow papers off the leader's desk, but twenty feet away it could hardly be felt. The plant manager said, "I said I would try out that fan, but in order to tell if it really works, you have to take the small floor fans out." Well, the floor fans stayed, and stayed, and stayed. One day the plant manager had enough and said, "The floor fans need to go out now." The coordinator panicked: "Got to take the fans away. Got to take the fans. The plant manager said so. We got to take the fans." Who do you think the sweaty, irritable employees were mad at? They were mad at the plant manager. The coordinator should have explained, "We've got this prop fan up here, but we don't know whether it's going to work or not unless we take the small fans out. We know you might suffer a little bit for a day or two, but we want to do a true trial, so bear with us. After the

---

***The sandwich approach:***  
**start out with the positive,**  
**sandwich in the concern, and close**  
**with something else positive.**

---

trial we'll get your feedback to find out if the working conditions are better or not." Unfortunately, that did not happen, and a year later there are still employees who are upset that their fans were taken away. When trust and respect is lost, it can be hard to regain.

One final suggestion to help build good relationships with employees is to develop your employees. Help them make the best use of their abilities. If they have strengths that are not being used, help them fit their skills to their tasks. Help them take their skills to the next level.

This can strengthen your company and increase the satisfaction of your employee. Employees are a critical part of your business's foundation. Investing in building strong employee relationships will yield returns for years to come.

---

*Steve Jones is a Personnel Training Specialist at Nishikawa Cooper, LLC. of Topeka, IN.*