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"Practice Using The Right People Skills In Business"

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Some leaders naturally possess people skills. Others must work at it.

No matter how you relate to others, there's always room for improvement. The challenge is to "learn how to behave more like a people person," said Terry Bacon, author of "What People Want."

Bacon, president and chief executive of **Lore International Institute**, an executive development firm in Durango, Colo., advises leaders on ways to connect with their workers. He likes to start by giving clients three tips, followed by three new tips a month later.

One of his clients, a 47-year-old executive, demanded 12 tips in their first meeting. Bacon responded, "I'll give you three now; we'll make sure you're doing them and then we'll add three more."

By concentrating on a trio of action steps at a time, you can apply them without feeling overwhelmed and really focus on change, Bacon says. His favorite tips:

Show interest in workers. Look for opportunities to ask follow-up questions. If an employee tells you how much she enjoyed counseling a customer, ask, "What did you enjoy about it?"

"When you have a deeper level of curiosity, it shows you care about what people think," Bacon said. "It also helps you understand them."

Notice red flags. When employees exhibit changes in their personality, don't shrug it off. Ask, "Is everything OK?"

If your staffer responds "yes," gently persist. Example: "You seem less enthusiastic than

normal today, a little down." This may spur a heart-to-heart conversation.

"When people deviate from their baseline behavior, try to find out why," Bacon said.

Keep your promises. You may make dozens of commitments to your team during a typical day. But swirling crises and emergencies can divert your attention.

When you make a promise, write it down promptly to remind you to follow through. Update people on your progress so that they know you didn't forget.

An employee will surely remember your promise, even if you don't. You create disloyalty if you fail to honor your commitments, Bacon says.

Hold feedback dialogues. The best way to critique employees is to begin by asking for their self-assessment. Instead of saying, "Chris, I see you're struggling with the new procedure," ask, "Chris, are you comfortable with the new procedure?"

This way, you spark a healthy give-and-take. That's better than declaring what people are doing wrong.

If the employee doesn't raise the criticism that you'd like to make, then share your observation in a supportive tone, Bacon says. Offer corrective steps and express confidence that the person can improve. Remember to give negative feedback if necessary.