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The Seven Saving Graces for Managers

Redeeming features prevent the strong characteristics that got you where you are from going into overdrive

by George Hallenbeck



In managerial and executive success, it is what comes after the “but” that is important. Executives are generally hard-charging drivers with rough edges. They are often not out to please people but are focused on getting things done.

What does the research say about the characteristics that keep an executive in favor, even if he or she possesses some flaws or shortcomings?

“He can be awfully shrewd and is always looking for an angle, but you eventually realize that he has got the company’s best interests at heart and is not looking out just for himself.” And, “She can be very forward and biting with her ideas and opinions, but she is also willing to take the time to listen carefully to your point of view.” Or, “He can be pretty rough on people, but underneath he is compassionate and considerate.”

What comes after the “but” are called saving graces—qualities or redeeming features that make up for other generally negative characteristics.

Saving graces serve as balancers so that the driver strengths that got you where you are do not go into overdrive and damage your efforts. They also offer benefits of their own. Because many saving

graces contribute to perceptions of you as someone who is trustworthy, considerate, and insightful, they can help you more easily acquire information from key people, gain access to limited resources, and navigate the bureaucracy.

The saving graces are listed in order of importance:

- 1. Listening:** Taking the time to listen can get you out of more jams than the rest of the saving graces combined. It is the ultimate way of demonstrating that it is not all about you and your agenda, and it is an excellent tool for breaking down barriers and getting more out of what you do with others. Few executives are good listeners.
- 2. Approachability:** The best executives need to be early knowers, especially when it comes to negative information. The best executives are easy to talk to, even when conveying or having potentially bad information conveyed to them. To be effective, approachability has to be combined with listening. Executives tend to play 20 Questions: “Where did you get the information? Who else knows? Why didn’t I hear about that before?” This is not a best practice for effective executives.
- 3. Boss Relationships:** Those who tend to venture into deep and dangerous waters find that it can be very difficult to swim alone. If you tend to stir up

controversy and are quick to engage in conflict, it is helpful to have the advice and counsel of a seasoned boss who can coach you through such situations and provide some support when you falter. Making your boss successful is Job One, whether you like him or her or not.

4. Integrity and Trust: This one speaks for itself. The people you lead will often forgive a lot if they can clearly perceive that you speak the truth and are a person of your word.

5. Humor: The use of humor to make others comfortable is a useful skill. Using self-deprecating humor is one of the better techniques. It puts others at ease and makes your thoughts appear to come from someplace a little more accessible. Humor allows you to become approachable by putting others at ease when in your presence.

6. Interpersonal Savvy: Being able to relate 360 degrees is important. Finding a way to make a connection with individuals up and down the chain and inside and outside the organization gives you something to rely on when things are not going so well. Diplomacy, tact, and knowing what to say and when to say it can take the tension out of situations and make unpopular decisions and unfortunate mistakes easier to deal with.

7. Understanding Others: The focus here is on groups rather than individuals. Understanding others is about knowing what makes one group different from another and why that matters. This is more difficult to master than listening, but learning to identify what is important to a group and why is often the key for gaining buy-in and knowing how to lead through difficult situations.

Saving graces are not the fire extinguisher you pull out in the case of emergency, but are more the trusty life preserver you should wear at all times, in calm waters and rough seas. Saving graces lead to longer tenure and staying power when coupled with the power skills like drive, strategy, results, and power. They can compensate for mistakes that would get those people who don't possess them into trouble. They smooth out the rough edges and can help smooth over rough situations.

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