



Another reason to be nice: It'll get you far on the job

By Stephanie Armour, USA TODAY

The time-worn adage that nice guys finish last isn't exactly true. Growing research shows that likable employees may have more success on the job.

Likability can even trump competence. A study this year in the *Harvard Business Review* found that personal feelings toward an employee play a more important role in forming work relationships than is commonly acknowledged. It is even more important than how competent an employee is seen to be.

The Likeability Factor by Tim Sanders, which was published this year, explores how having an appealing personality can positively influence life and careers.

"Life is a popularity contest," Sanders says. "We want to work with people that make us feel good to be around them. Likability is the tiebreaker to almost anything."

Likability is hard to define, but Sanders says people gravitate toward others who deliver psychological benefits. In other words, likability is the ability to produce a positive emotional experience in someone else, such as making co-workers feel good about themselves.

How likable an employee is can be critical:

•**Likable employees are favored by co-workers.** The *Harvard Business Review* study found that employees don't want to work with someone who is disliked, and it almost doesn't matter how skilled they are.

Co-workers would rather work with the likable colleague, according to the research by Harvard Business School professor Tiziana Casciaro and Duke University assistant professor Miguel Sousa Lobo.

"Organizations have traditionally focused on competencies and thinking ability of their staff. There is growing recognition, however, that job effectiveness can be undone if an employee is not likable," Susan David, a psychologist and researcher at Yale University, says in an e-mail.

"Being proficient at job tasks is of little comfort to the organization if an employee alienates clients or other staff."

•**How likable an employee is can also influence customers.** Research has found customers' perceptions of the employees they deal with can influence their overall feelings toward a company.

Nearly 60% of customers say that, when faced with rudeness, they take their business elsewhere, even if it means going out of their way or paying a higher price, according to a survey by Eticon, a Columbia, S.C.-based provider of etiquette consulting for business.

At Pop Diner in New York, a busy staff is also known by its customers as friendly. Co-owner Nick Tsakonas says that's no accident.

He believes having a friendly wait staff can influence his customers' perceptions of the restaurant, even if something goes awry.

"You could tell me you're a waiter at The Waldorf-Astoria, and that doesn't cut it with me. You have to have personality," Tsakonas says. "Even if a mistake happens, a good personality will wipe that out."

•Likability can help career advancement. Likable employees are also more likely to get bigger pay raises and promotions. Employees with skills in relationship building are often seen as valuable to an organization, Sanders says.

Some employees say their pleasant personalities have helped them to get ahead.

Cara Halstead Cea, in Pleasantville, N.Y., is one of the public relations officers at Pace University. She describes herself as "outgoing, friendly, and I'm told I'm easygoing."

"My bosses tend to like me as do clients, co-workers, customers (and) business contacts, which has allowed me the freedom to do what I need to do to get the job done without a boss breathing down my neck and checking on my every move," Halstead Cea says. "I think this has helped me be efficient and effective in the work that I do."

A collaborative workplace

Co-workers who work with a likable colleague are more comfortable with them, so work tends to be more collaborative.

Some employers say likable employees are so important that they won't hire anyone they think may have an attitude. Richard Laermer, chief executive of New York-based RLM Public Relations, says he once had an employee who was so unlikable that she berated a client's product and chastised co-workers. Laermer says he ultimately let her go.

"Then I did something I'd never done before," he says. "I called all the managers into my office, and we had champagne."

After that, he says, he went out of his way to gauge potential employees' personalities as well as their skills.

"No matter how experienced or valuable someone is, if they're mean to people, they're pretty much useless. I can't work with someone who isn't nice."

But there can also be a downside. Likable employees who lack skills or are seen as pushovers can lose out on management opportunities or can be seen as a liability, says Alexandra Levit, author of *They Don't Teach Corporate in College: A Twenty-Something's Guide to the Business World*.

Managers who are too likable can get too sociable with their subordinates, blurring the line between boss and friend. And younger Generation X or Generation Y employees can try so hard to be liked that they come across as overly enthusiastic.

"There's a tendency of young people, and even midcareer people, to say 'yes' all the time. In an effort to please, they do get pushed around. They get assigned too many tasks," Levit says. "Likability can be dangerous. Young people can be too enthusiastic, and it can irritate management. You can be too 'rah rah.' "

But some employers say likability is still an important attribute. Tory Johnson, CEO of New York-based Women for Hire, which provides career fairs for women, says women may try too hard, which can come across as unfocused or desperate. And while she doesn't hire employees just because they are nice, she does say that personality is key.

In fact, it can even help employees keep their jobs when performance is lacking.

"As an employer, likability is more important to me than possession of specific skills or experience. You can provide training to compensate for missing skills, but it's almost impossible to compensate for personality," Johnson says in an e-mail.

"It's never worth hiring someone you dislike, or someone who's likely to be disliked among staffers."

Instead of terminating someone, she says, she's "moved poor performers into other functions within my company because I really liked the people."