

Six Feet from a Spider

Julie Todaro

On a recent crime show (the one that almost has its own channel), a major guest star in one particularly creepy scene, states that she was an *arachnologist* or, as we all know, someone who studies spiders. Musing about her profession and her target research—spiders—she begins to talk about all the wonderful things that spiders do and quotes a number of spider facts about their good work for the environment and their sheer numbers and locations. She finishes her discourse by saying (almost gleefully) that no matter where you are on Earth, you are never more than six feet from a spider. To say that sentence captivates me is an understatement. In fact, I went from reacting strongly and negatively to an unhealthy image of spiders hanging around my head longing to play in my hair, to gazing around my home office and locating—not always six feet, but absolutely no more than twenty feet away—a number of spiders or at least their webs signaling they were once there and possibly returning.

Upon closer inspection of my two nearby webs *with* spiders, I was comforted by their utter lack of interest in me, and I realized I was comforted by their presence (after all they feed on my least favorite insects—mosquitoes). I began to recall my experiences with spiders throughout the years including: the zipper spider from my yard whose body was as big as a quarter and whose web “zipper” was more than twelve inches long; the dozens of daddy long-legs who clustered on inside and outside walls in poor weather and bounced nervously as I drew near in an attempt to count them; the small spider in my Houston apartment who slowly moved all eighteen feet across my ceiling in order to lower himself (or herself) right over my head for no good reason; and finally, the hopelessly lost “country” tarantula who hid out in an camping bedroll (what a surprise, not mine!) and then moved into one of our family bathrooms until my mother (risking a heart attack and damaging dozens of beige tiles) liberated him from the house with a shovel. And who can forget our literary spiders—Anansi, Miss Spider, and of course Charlotte leading the pack. In short, I realized I counted on their presence in my home and realized their importance in my yard.



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So, as usual, if you read this column with any regularity, you are asking yourself, what on earth does my interest in and history with spiders have to do with management?

Actually, quite a lot. I see the “six feet” remark as a reassuring statement and one that can be broadly interpreted in today’s workplace. How do we make six feet work for us as managers? How can a work environment be productive with six-foot employees or six-foot managers without these very close employees or managers suffering from micromanagement? It is true that typically close, much less very close, is considered inappropriate and non-productive for most activities in workplaces. But when you review both classic and contemporary aspects of management, several aspects are clearly “close” activities. In fact, five management aspects can be identified as close, or as six feet: Succession Management, Orientation, Mentoring, Training and Retraining, and Communication in the Best and Worst of Times.

1. Succession Management

Although I’m not convinced succession management is the best way to plan for an organization’s next generation of activities or managers, it is clear from reviewing contemporary management literature that many think it is one of the few things that will position organizations and employees for successful futures. This particular aspect has existing managers identifying specific employees or an employee to work with to prepare them for either their own management job or a higher-level management job in general. Clearly this activity is predicated on close, that is, a review of management opportunities and specific responsibilities, a specific communication plan throughout the succession process, a detailed orientation to the process, an assessment of competencies, identification of gaps in employee competencies (knowledge, skills/abilities, and attitudes), and a program of specific training and professional development—all on a specific timeline—targeted or designed for specific employees or a specific employee, are based on a close relationships. These close aspects are not only recommended but also required for the most successful succession management plans.

2. Orientation

Orientation is considered the critical element for either new employees or employees who move from one job to another. Orientation, a significant and separate element from training, involves the employee's first time on the job. While this time varies in length, from job to job and from employee to employee, and can be broken down to a first-day, first-week, and first-month time period, the essence is an intensive, structured immersion period where a manager delivers (in a wide variety of appropriate formats) a specific set of instructions and timely assessments designed to bring employees up to speed for specific measures in a predetermined period of time. The secret here (as one might imagine) is close. Managers need to stay close to the design of orientations to ensure that they match the beginning elements of success for employee job responsibilities, and managers need to stay close to employees during orientation periods to provide the observation and management needed to appropriately assess an employee's grasp of concepts and completion of activities during specific timelines. In organizations where probationary periods exist in the first few months of employment, close is even more important to provide the assessment, feedback, and correction (as needed) to ensure employees have the orientation they need to be successful during their first days or weeks at work.

3. Mentoring

For new staff and for staff who are changing areas of responsibility, learning specific new skills, or acquiring new knowledge, mentors are a critical element in work environments and organizational structures. Mentors can be used to inculcate new employees into organizations, train or retrain, alter or enhance organizational attitudes, create work product, provide outlets for discussion, guide projects, direct research, and provide alternative professional opinions. The nature of mentoring is not the supervision of the employee completing work or learning or relearning but rather the establishment of close avenues for the exchange of specific information with the emphasis on "exchange." Mentors keep a close watch but employees being mentored stay close for the purpose of having a sounding board for asking questions, clarifying instructions, getting reality checks, solving problems, and in general receiving non-judgmental and specifically non-supervisory feedback and assistance.

4. Training and Retraining

Training and retraining, terms used for teaching employees those necessary skills and abilities for work success, typically include training on hardware, software, interaction activities such as customer service, conflict resolution, and those more process-oriented and rote aspects of job responsibilities. Although the design of training should always be linked to the employee and the target information or content to be learned, much training is predicated on learning outcomes being closely watched and assessed to determine if staff are learning and applying critical skills. The best and most successful trainers—whether members of the workplace or outside trainers—plan for classroom interactions between employee and trainer, learner pairing with other classmates or employees who excel at the activity, immediate assessment opportunities, and practice opportunities with learning partners. These close relationships last through the teaching/training event and typically end after a successful assessment of the employee needing training.

5. Communication in the Best and Worst of Times

Organizations with communication plans in place focus on communicating content appropriately and in a timely fashion. In the best-designed communication plans, however, two types of communication are best handled closely by managers. These include the communication of the best or most positive information as well as the communication that takes place in the worst of times or situations. In both of these instances, what is being communicated needs a general emphasis as well as a more specific tying of information to individual job levels and job descriptions or employees. This closer, more targeted information, is best delivered and interpreted as needed when managers take great care to make it relevant to the individual in the workplace for the quickest level of understanding and application to both general and work responsibilities, as needed.

So, what have we learned? I watch *way* too much television (much of which is crime-oriented), spiders play a major role in our lives, and "close" is an important aspect of a workplace. And if you are asking . . . *how* close? Six feet sounds good.