When I was a new manager 40 years ago, I learned a very valuable lesson from my company's HR director.

The team I managed was not large, perhaps about 10 people. The product from the team was the creation and maintenance of a technology library with documentation for a multitude of systems.

One morning, one of the team members asked to speak with me in my office. She looked upset, which was unusual for her. My first thoughts, even before she sat down, were that she was going to tell me she was leaving. I did not want this to happen; this young woman was the model employee. Her work was of the highest quality, and always on time or ahead of time. She reached out to others when they needed help and gave freely of her knowledge and expertise.

At that time, this employee was the only person I had ever awarded the highest rating possible on an annual appraisal. Her work ethic and business reputation were outstanding.
The employee told me she had lost her childcare provider as of the end of the week. She was a single mother of two girls and had, up until now, a very stable arrangement for her childcare. She was distressed about the loss of the caregiver as well as the impact on her children. To further compound the issue, this employee had used up most of her vacation. She was worried she might have to take unpaid leave, which she could not afford.

We discussed what she needed to address this issue. She said she thought that she would be able to find an alternative caregiver for her girls within 1-2 weeks. She asked if she could use the following year's vacation to cover her absence rather than take unpaid leave. I said I would like to discuss this with HR, as the company rules did not allow individuals to take vacation credit from a future year.

The HR director listened to my summary of the situation. I was concerned that I could lose a most valuable employee. This director had helped many a manager navigate through company policies.

The HR director put the issue back into my hands to decide how to proceed, but not before he gave me some wise advice. This employee had given me her best performance at work and unpaid leave would be a hardship. Was there something I could give back to her? I had the authority to manage my budget and my department goals. Was there a middle ground at which I could 'bend the rules' for a high achiever?

With confidence in my decision, I proposed to the employee that she take the first week off without using vacation days and without losing any pay. It was another way to thank her for outstanding quality and delivery of her work. This was not the policy but as a manager I had the discretion to approve this approach. If she needed the second week, we would look at ways to 'work back' any vacation days she had to use to find the right caregiver for her children.

She was relieved and grateful. She found the right caregiver for her children within one week. She returned to work in a positive frame of mind and continued to be the highest achiever in the department. She stayed with the company for many years to come.

Dilemmas can have win-win solutions especially when both parties want to make it happen. Be creative in your managerial decisions, and be sure to reward those hard working employees that deserve it.

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Columnist series sponsored by weVENTURE (formerly the Women’s Business Center) powered by the Florida Institute of Technology. weVENTURE has locations in Melbourne, Rockledge
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