

This is an excerpt from *Saving The World At Work* by Tim Sanders
Visit: www.TimSanders.com to buy the book or connect!

A few years ago, I gave a lecture at a technology conference about the dangerous high-tech/low-touch management style in which e-mail replaces face-to-face contact, even when the manager's employees work in the same building.

It's possible, I argued, that you could work for months without much real human contact with your coworkers or your boss. I explained how dangerous this isolation can be when coupled with a lack of recognition—too many managers fear that if they give specific praise to an employee who is later laid off, the compliment could fuel an employee lawsuit for unjust dismissal.

This pattern leads to workplace depression, I continued, presenting research showing how depression in turn leads to ill health, poor productivity, and low morale. I argued that everyone in the audience needed to rescue their people from such unnecessary pain and suffering, and that that task was a vital component of good management and saving the world at work.

I concluded my talk with this thought: "If there are people in your life who are important to you, and you haven't given them sufficient recognition in the last three months, shame on you. If you've reduced your relationships to e-mail threads, shame on you. If you acted like this toward your children, I would tell you that you weren't a good parent. If you did this to your friends, I would tell you you're not a good friend. If this is your management style, I would tell you you're not a good manager."

Then I invited the audience to ask me questions or share stories. A few days later, I received an e-mail from someone I'll call Steve, a manager at a software company. In the note he admitted, "I'm guilty as charged. I'm exactly the type of manager you described. I have nine software engineers who report to me. We all work in the same building, and I've seen only one of them face-to-face in at least three months. We do everything over e-mail and instant messenger.

"Worse than that, I haven't praised anyone since last year's annual review. Yet all nine of my engineers are great workers and good people, and they don't deserve to be treated this way. What should I do?" I told him to take immediate action by spending time thinking about the contributions each one of his nine employees made to the company, and to him. Meet with them in person, I said, and give them the recognition they deserve. The rest will take care of itself.

About a week later, Steve sent me a note I'll never forget as long as I live. The subject line of the e-mail was "Xbox Story." The following tale is somewhat graphic, but I have to tell it in full to convey its power and show why it changed my life.

Steve told me that he'd met with all nine of his engineers that day, making one positive personal and one positive professional comment. Two days later, one of his engineers (whose real name he disguised as Lenny) entered Steve's cubicle just as Steve was arriving at work. Carrying a box wrapped in brown paper and topped with a bow, Lenny told Steve he wanted to give him a gift. Steve unwrapped the box and found a remarkable prize: an Xbox gaming system and a copy of the John Madden Football video game.

Steve was thrilled.

But it wasn't his birthday or a special occasion, and Steve hadn't given Lenny a raise for as long as he could remember. On top of that, all of his engineers had been grumbling that they could hardly make ends meet on their meager salaries. So Steve asked Lenny where he got the extra money for such a lavish gift. Lenny looked him straight in the eye and said words no manager ever expects to hear: "I sold my chrome-plated 9mm semiautomatic."

Lenny told Steve that though he had worked at the company for two years, in all that time Steve had never asked Lenny a single question about himself. Now he wanted to answer the questions Steve had never asked. Lenny had moved to town from Denver the day after he buried his mom, who had died suddenly. Lenny's mother was his only close friend and only real confidante. "She understood my nerdy ways," he said. So Lenny moved to a new city and took a job at a company

where he thought he would find other nerds and make new friends. But, he said, "People here aren't very friendly. No one ever speaks to me in the halls or the lunch room."

When Steve looked surprised, Lenny continued, "I've worked here two years, and if I died, you'd only find out from payroll, because the direct deposit wouldn't go in anymore. That's how disconnected I thought you were from me."

"I don't have a single friend in the company. I come in every day, log in, and spend my life looking at a computer screen." Lenny said that his only friend in the world was the Internet. So he logged on daily to look for solutions, and found several. "Suicide chat rooms," he said. "They're filled with other people just like me. And they told me what to do. They told me about 'the program.' "The first step is to buy a gun so beautiful that you want to come home from work every day and admire it. It helps you get over being afraid of it."

Lenny saved up for several months and bought a chrome-plated, 9mm pistol, which he stored in a Cohiba cigar box. Every night when he got home from work, he'd open the box and look at the gun.

A few months later, he started the program's next step. After work he'd put on the right mood music, which in his case was Kurt Cobain, and then get up the courage to take the gun out of the box and practice holding it in his hand.

Steve, silent, let Lenny spill his story.

"There's another step, called teething," Lenny explained. "It's a difficult but important part of the program. Here you get used to the sensation of the barrel of the gun sitting on top of your teeth, because they teach you right away in the chat room that you've got to put the gun inside your mouth and not upside your head, otherwise you'll only graze yourself and it won't work."

"And it takes a while," Lenny added, "to get over the shakes." Another step is called "the final approach," which was where Lenny had recently arrived. "You load the gun. You take the safety off. You put the barrel of the gun inside your mouth and put some pressure on the trigger. Each night, same routine, more pressure. I was getting closer and closer and closer. I was almost there."

"And then, the other day," Lenny continued, "you freaked me out. You come into my cubicle, you put your sweaty arm around me, and you tell me that you admired the fact that I turned in every project one day early, and it helped you sleep at night. Which, by the way, Steve, is my style. You also told me that I had an incredible sense of humor over e-mail, and that I made the whole group laugh when times were stressful."

Moving closer to his boss, Lenny whispered, "But then you told me, 'Lenny, I'm glad you came into my life.' "I went home that night, put on Kurt Cobain, and started my nightly routine. But when I opened up the cigar box, as the light reflected off the chrome, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. And for the first time I was afraid to die. Before I could catch myself, I said out loud to no one in particular, 'Lenny, I'm glad you came into my life.'"

"At that minute, I was off the program. I shut the cigar box and put it in my backpack. I called in sick yesterday, because I wanted to sell the gun immediately. I took it back to the pawnshop that sold it to me, and they gave me a few hundred bucks. I thought to myself, "What do I want to spend this money on?"

"Then I remembered that you had been bellyaching for a month over e-mail that your financial controller at home, aka your wife, wouldn't let you buy the new Xbox gaming system because you had a new baby."

With tears streaming down his cheeks, Lenny said, "Sir, in exchange for my life, my soul, this gift is for you."