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Be the Leader Your People Want

by Robert Evangelista

"Leadership should be born out of the understanding of the needs of those who should be affected by it."
Marian Anderson

What does leadership look like to your employees?
Should you care?

If you listen to your team, the answer is a resounding "yes." In fact, in a recent study on leadership that involved over 3,000 respondents in 14 countries, it was found that a majority of organizations do not have high confidence in their leaders' abilities (Bernthal, 2003).

Think it doesn't make that big of a difference? Think again. The same study found that employees with strong leaders are significantly more productive than associates with weak leaders. In fact, strong leaders foster an environment where employees are 37 percent more likely to outperform work groups with weak leaders.

Consider what your employees need from you and your fellow leaders. They don't want blank stares from clueless wimps. They don't want a barrage of orders from dictator bosses. They want leadership. And we're all capable of it

So, think hard and think long about what your team needs from you.

I: Give them a plan they can win with

Sure, most of us have shared visions, goals, targets and well-crafted mission statements with our team. Chances are, we've also seen employees roll their eyes at them. Why? They need to know how your vision relates to them. Conversely, you as a leader need spend the time to think through specifically how they can contribute to the reality of that vision.

One of the first messages that new hires of The Cheesecake Factory hear on their first days is that the customer's experience must be fun, flawless and memorable. However, the words come alive in the elements of their roles and job assignments that reinforce these ideals every minute of every day.

II: Reach out and teach your people

In an orchestra, it is easy to draw the line between conductor and the players. As Neeme Jarvi, musical director of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra put it, "I don't play the instruments. My job is to get all of the individuals to contribute their best so that together they create beauty."

In the workplace, the roles of leader and employee aren't always so definitive, especially in small businesses where owners work alongside employees. But once again, consider the vantage point of your employees. You may see them as a peer, but it isn't so from their perspective. When your employees look up the company ladder, it's your butt that they see.

Just a conductor, we must focus on growing our team's talents and developing their capabilities. In the workplace, opportunities to teach are everywhere: a conversation at the water cooler, a staff meeting, one-on-one. Leaders must always look for that chance to reinforce prior lessons, over-communicate strategies, prepare contingencies for "what if" scenarios.

III: Stand back and let your people go!

In all sizes of businesses, one of the hardest things for a leader to do is to let go of the details once work is under way. It's in many managers DNA: the need to control the activities or to be the center of all information and decision-making. On the other hand, if you've done a thorough job of preparing and developing them, then you need to step back. Undoubtedly, you'll be surprised at what they can do without you. More significant to your organization, though, is what you can do with the extra time and clarity.

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International Flavors & Fragrances, the \$3 Billion company that makes your cologne smell and your soft drink taste great. With operations around the globe, Dennis Wall, Vice President Asia-Pacific says, "I can't be in every country. So it becomes essential to set local operations up to succeed on their own."

IV: Bring the lessons home

Every day, employees perform hundreds, if not thousands of actions. So each day, there are an equal number of opportunities to observe performance. Our team members need to learn from their failures AND their successes. Asking employees "Why do you think that didn't work?" or "What did you do differently this time that made that go so well?" will cause them to assess their own performance--- a very powerful form of learning.

Leadership is not an all or nothing quality. Whether you believe true leaders are born that way or not, the fact remains that it is a quality that can be nurtured, developed and practiced. By acting in the right manner, purposefully with a plan, we can gain our team's confidence and the bottom line results that come with it.

The Ritz Carlton in Dearborn, already a local legend for excellence, is undergoing changes to propel it to world-class levels of service. After witnessing Gerard van Grinsven, the hotel's general manager, personally visiting each table in the dining room, my curiosity was aroused. As I found out, van Grinsven has more motives than just good PR. "It is my opportunity to hear firsthand how our employees are doing. Customers will share good and bad experiences with me." What were his intentions for that information? He quickly answered, "It goes right back to the team. They need to hear both the good and bad reviews. It's the only way they will know how to improve."

"The task of leadership is not to put greatness into people, but to elicit it, for the greatness is there already."

— John Buchan

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