Leadership Development – Why Take the Time?

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Leadership Development – Why Take the Time?

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> Learn how to gauge yourself as a leader

This is the first in a series of management/leadership articles. We will be addressing the issues, questions and solutions facing both traditional field leaders who hire and train sales people, and insurance/financial services professionals whose success depends on a strong support staff.

Management and leadership both encompass getting things done through others. Managers and leaders are not measured on what they, as individuals, produce. They are measured and rewarded (or penalized) for their team's results. Leaders can't do it alone. Leadership vision, mission, strategies, objectives, change initiatives—these all require interaction with people who will ultimately help the leader make it happen.

Leadership and management are linked but consist of distinct skills. Leadership is concerned with creating and communicating vision and mission, and driving the culture of an organization. Management is focused on effective execution of tasks. Management has somehow become a dirty word. Nobody seems to aspire to excellence in management. However, Peter Drucker, one of the pioneers of the field, said that excellence in management is a necessary precursor to excellence in leadership. Without great managers, or at least management skills, organizations will get nothing done. A final yet critically important distinction is that manager is a job title given to someone by an organization and leader is a concept only awarded by willing followers. If someone looks over his or her shoulder and no one is there, that person is not a leader. Some of the most influential leaders are often in the middle of an organization, not necessarily at the top. For the sake of simplicity, for the rest of the article, I will use the term leadership instead of switching back and forth.

Most of us received training for specific job skills when we began our careers—computer, sales, customer service, etc. When we become leaders, at the point where we begin to affect more than just our own results, development opportunities often become scarce. Why is leadership development so important? Leadership consultant Dr. Gordon Curphy created a simple exercise highlighting the critical reasons for leadership development.

1. List all of your previous managers.
2. Place a checkmark next to the names of the managers for whom you would willingly go back to work.
3. Calculate the percentages.

The average person would willingly go back to work for about 35 percent of previous managers. The top 35 percent of leaders for whom people would willingly go back to work are not pushovers.

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Leadership skill can be developed. Top leaders make an intentional study of leadership. They look for learning in all of their experiences, and they are always looking for opportunities to learn. Leaders who are looking for opportunities to learn are not sitting back and saying, “We have always done it like this—it works!” Learning leaders are willing to put themselves in positions of uncertainty, to take chances.

The top 35 percent of leaders for whom people would willingly go back to work are not pushovers. When asked about their characteristics, people often describe the leader as someone who pushed them to reach their highest potential, not someone who took it easy on them. Future articles in this series will explore the traits and skills of these high-performing leaders.

There is a simple way to determine how you are doing as a leader. We call it an informal 360. Ask your boss, two peers and several followers to answer the following questions as they relate to the productivity of the business unit:

- What should I continue doing?
- What should I start doing?
- What should I stop doing?

The rules are simple. First, the responses must be gathered verbally; face-to-face is best, but the phone will work as well. E-mailed responses are essentially worthless for this exercise. Second, Vegas rules apply; there can be no retaliation for any comments. Tell the respondents this rule up front. Finally, do not defend yourself during the conversation — just listen and prompt further comments. If you jump in and explain why you do something it will shut down the conversation.

The purpose of this exercise is twofold: The feedback can be very beneficial, and, more important, it will let you know if you are the kind of manager people feel comfortable telling the truth. If you can't get respondents, especially followers, to give you corrective feedback, they are afraid of your reaction.

Honest lines of communication are critically important to the long-term success of leaders. I have instructed and debriefed more than 300 managers on this exercise over the last two years, and the revelations are often astounding. Try it and feel free to share your experience with me. Many managers do this exercise quarterly or semi-annually (rotating respondents) to ensure open lines of communication.

The first step in excellence in management is self-management. Once you become a manager it is not just about you getting your own job done. Your behavior, attitudes and moods affect your whole team. One of my students told the class about his first, very moody sales manager. The sales manager’s assistant would put a green or red sticky note on the top of her computer monitor to indicate the manager’s mood. The sales team learned to limit interaction on red days. Do you want your team to monitor and limit communication with you because they fear how you might react on any given day? Or are all of your days red days? Do you know yourself as a leader?

Daniel Goleman is considered to be the authority on emotional intelligence, having written several books on the subject. Emotional intelligence is a combination of self-awareness and the awareness of our effect on others — and the ability to consciously control both. Before we can effectively manage others, we must be able to manage ourselves. The challenge for many leaders is that introspection takes time and courage. When we peel back the layers, we may not like what we find. Leaders who are willing to take a hard look at themselves, and then do something about what needs to be fixed, are less likely to be derailed.

The Dr. Gordy test is from, Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons of Success, 6th edition.