

Leading Humans

I feel the same way about leadership advice that Paul McCartney felt about silly love songs. You would think the world has had enough, but if you look around, you see it isn't so.



Great leaders do not lose their optimism, but they also do not lose their sense of reality.

So, here we go again. I have coached several top-level executives who wanted to be better leaders, were extremely intelligent and had a lot of technical education and experience in their respective industries. All of them struggled with exactly what they should do to increase their effectiveness and engage their people. All of them were masters of leading and managing almost everything except human beings.

In looking back at what I most often suggested and taught these leaders, four categories stood out in my notes and memories. The four categories became targeted areas of improvement for these leaders and proved to be highly impactful when mastered. All are basic ways of treating humans like humans while leading them toward organizational goals.

These not are the only things leaders must do well, but they are the ones most leaders instinctively or automatically don't do well as they became leaders. They just are not behavioral improvement targets, but mindset changes that tend to result in a better leadership style as well.

Be human – Many leaders intentionally or unintentionally separate themselves from other people in their organizations. This just not is a difference in paygrade or lifestyle. It is a difference in humanity.

Many leaders almost have no contact with the people at lower levels other than the occasional parade to show that they manage by wandering

around. Conversations strictly are about business or have shallow platitudes of “How is the family?” as introductions to business discussions.

The most effective leaders stay connected to their people at the human level as well as the business level. You can't know or be close friends with everyone in a large organization, but you can form circles of extended family and friends. Humans follow humans, not just ideas, visions, missions, strategies and goals.

Be optimistically realistic – Great leaders do not lose their optimism, but they also do not lose their sense of reality. Stretch goals cannot become “mission impossible” and still elicit the best effort from other human beings.

Truly effective leaders target progress rather than perfection. They realize that all goals must be reached a step at a time and that unrealistic goals targeted at perfection actually stifle discretionary effort. Humans need to see the light at the end of the tunnel if they are to press forward with all their might and ability.

It often is argued that goals of 100 percent or “zero accidents” prevent developing a tolerance for some degree of failure. However, they also can send the message that anything short of perfection is failure. This mindset necessitates that leaders not overreact to failures with overkill rules or procedures.

Over-control is another excellent way to demotivate a workforce and create a chasm between work-



ers – the practical ones who get things done – and their leader, the unrealistic maker of rules that don't help accomplish their purpose.

Be your own translator – Leaders often come from one of the silos of function within their organization. Engineers tend to speak a technical language, attorneys tend to speak a language of exposure and control, financial managers tend to speak the language of money and salespeople tend to make everything a sales pitch. Workers speak a completely different language, and often workers from different departments, crafts or trades speak their own language.

Great leaders are translators. Not only can they speak the language of each group, but they can address the issues particular to that group. When you assess a culture and workers regularly say that their leader really speaks their language, you have found an effective leader.

Some leaders count on their department managers to translate their message to each group. I have seen this work, but even at best this puts another degree of distance between the leader and the workers. The message gets through but the humanity of the leader does not. Leadership becomes theoretical and abstract rather than a human function of the organization. The coach is up in the press box sending in the plays rather than down on the field with the players.

Stay inside the culture – Being an effective translator is a great first step to staying inside the culture, but it is not enough. Great leaders are perceived as a member of the culture, not just someone who can speak the language.

Leaders need to show compassion and kindness to others and treat them with respect and dignity. When tragedy strikes, great leaders show they care about individuals and families, not just numbers and expenses. When things go well, great leaders give credit rather than take it.

Cultures are said to be resistant to change, yet they constantly are changing. The underlying truth is that cultures resist forces outside of the culture and respond to those within. This is why leaders want to stay inside, where they can have influence without causing resistance.

People who rise to organizational leadership positions usually do so because of their talents, abilities and/or past history of exemplary performance. That means they do something or some things exceptionally well.

Many leaders recognize their own strengths and weaknesses and seek to address them in one of several ways. Either they surround themselves with people who possess the skills they lack, they seek to enhance the skills in which they are weak or do a combination of the two.

True excellence in leadership begins with the realization that organizational performance is less about great leaders and more about leading great people. Leaders who understand the importance of the human beings in their organization realize that humans must be treated as

humans if they are to reach their greatest potential. Every leader I have coached became more effective when they mastered the mindset and techniques of being a human while leading humans. **EHS**

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