



What followers want in their leaders

All companies need the right individuals with the right competencies (e.g., soft and hard skills) to advance the capabilities of the firm. From whom do you seek input when determining leadership development efforts — leaders or followers?

Most organizations backtrack from desired results to identify what performance contributed to those results. From this, key competen-

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cies, roles and responsibilities are established and are relied upon to direct leadership development. If the goal is to direct expected behavior toward expected results, this approach has merit. But, if the goal is to create an engaged culture that nudges discretionary effort to deliver breakthrough performance, leadership development takes on a new meaning.

The natural tendency is to profile a desirable leader based on input from executives to front-line supervisors. This is, indeed, valuable. If you have yet to identify the leadership expectations of those currently in leadership positions, your efforts will be misaligned. But, what about the followers? Do leaders know what followers are motivated by?

In “The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations,” authors James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner identified the following four characteristics of great leaders: honest, competent, forward-looking and inspiring. In “Why Should Anyone Be Led By You” by Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones, the desires of followers were: community, authenticity, significance and excitement. A Gallup Research Team, Tom Rath and Barary Conchie, asked more than 10,000 followers what the most influential leaders do to contribute to their lives. The answers were provided in their book, “Strengths Based Leadership: Great Leaders, Teams, and Why People Follow,” and were listed as: trust, compassion, stability and hope.

Interestingly, none had anything to do with

results. Rather, all have more intrinsic, emotional classifications and a sense of “feeling.” So, is it better to focus leadership development on facilitating an increase in organizational feeling and emotional intelligence, or on knowledge and behavior that will contribute to business results? The answer is both if you desire a culture that wants to contribute to results, rather than one made up of individuals who feel obligated to.

One exercise that is used when helping leaders move from being perceived as a cop to a coach for performance management is to discuss the experiences they may have had with an effective coach when participating in a sport. “When you think of a great coach you once had, what characteristics did they have that come to mind?” Like the findings in the aforementioned books and research, I have always received emotional responses (e.g., great listener, showed they cared about you, took the time to make sure you understood).

According to John Kotter of Harvard Business School, people respond emotionally to change before responding logically. Kotter also found two of the three main reasons people might resist change are emotional (“They

don’t like the change.” and “They don’t like the individual bringing the change.”) For the reader’s benefit, the third reason Kotter found is, “They don’t understand the change.”

Leadership development should meet the expectations of senior leadership as their buy-in and reinforcement are vital. But, if it isn’t also aligned with the individual and collective desires of those expected to do the following, leaders will be developed in a manner that produces minimal return on investment and, worse, creates barriers to future leadership improvement attempts. Nothing more effectively compromises the ability to capture results in developing leaders like previous failed attempts.

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