

Leading a Complex Workforce

By Mary Cooper

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Leaders today work with the most complicated workforce in history. For the first time, four generations are employed side by side, each at different stages of life, and each with conflicting perspectives, expectations, and needs. The members of each of these groups have largely been shaped by the social and economic events that have occurred during their lifetimes, and they have very different perspectives and expectations of their jobs and their leaders. In addition to generational diversity, today's workforce is also ethnically and culturally diverse. As a result, leaders are discovering that they need new skills.

Motivating and inspiring this complex group of workers is a challenging and rewarding experience. Successful management allows the organization to capitalize on diverse ideas and styles of working that lead to innovation. Leaders can need to learn to tap into the resources a multigenerational and multicultural workforce provides, handle misunderstandings and misperceptions, and make the most of employee's varied talents and worldviews.

GENERAL STRATEGIES

Although employees are of different generations and backgrounds, there are general strategies that help with motivation and productivity.

1. **Treat Others with Respect.**

Respect others' social, economic, generational, cultural, religious, life and work experience, and lifestyle differences. Think of each person as a collectible first edition book and go beyond the cover to learn who's inside, so you can truly understand and appreciate them. Venture capitalist Irwin Federman said, "Your job gives you authority, your behavior gives you respect." To foster loyalty and commitment, recognize, honor, and appreciate each person for the strengths and gifts they bring to the team.

2. **Inspire a Shared Vision.**

The difference between a credible person and a credible leader is having a vision. A vision pulls people forward and unites them around a common purpose. It helps employees focus on shared aspirations and working together to achieve exciting possibilities, while seeing how their long-term interests can be realized as well. The best leaders are those who are able to help employees see how the employee's personal goals align with the organization's goals and vision. Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple, put it best: "If you are working on something exciting that you really care about, you don't have to be pushed. The vision pulls you." Communicating your vision can help in recruitment efforts, as well.

3. **Make It Easy for Others to Express their Ideas.**

The most innovative environments are those where people feel comfortable sharing their suggestions and concerns, and where healthy disagreement can occur. Involve employees, ask their opinion, and consider characteristics and traits that may inhibit employees and keep them from expressing their ideas. Solicit ideas in different ways. Some people are comfortable speaking in groups, for instance, while others prefer speaking one on one. People perform at their best when they can make changes, and therefore it's important to provide a safe environment for employees to suggest new ways of doing things.

4. **Commit to Ongoing Growth.**

As a leader, provide employees with not only the tools and resources they need to perform job tasks, but to develop competence and confidence to maximize their potential (for example, skill development, career advancement, or learning a second language). This can be done through formal training, buddy systems, cross-training, and mentoring. *First Break All the Rules*, by Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman,¹ provides 12 key questions linking engaged employees to improved outcomes such as productivity, retention, and customer satisfaction (“Is there someone at work who encourages my development?” “This last year, have I had opportunities at work to learn and grow?”) Consider how you can tap into experience and expertise with new challenges and develop the skill level of those who are new to your organization.

5. **Give Credit and Recognize Contributions.**

William James, the father of American psychology, said, “The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated.” Personal, specific, relevant, timely, and sincere appreciation doesn't have to cost anything — just be sure to honor the individual's personal preference for public or private recognition. According to a presentation by Bob Nelson, president of Nelson Motivation, employees in this kind of environment are 11 times more likely to feel completely committed,² and employees who are committed to their work put in 57 percent more effort than those who aren't committed.³

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6. **Develop Strong Communication Skills.**

Managers need to clearly articulate standards of performance, rules and parameters, and the “why” behind policies and procedures. Be open and honest in your communications and provide information in a timely manner, making use of everything technology has to offer (and not relying solely on e-mail). Be direct and respectful in holding everyone accountable for perfor-

mance and behaviors, giving specific feedback about any changes and improvements that might be needed. Most important — and often overlooked — work on your ability to listen well. This is the way to know people rather than categories.

7. **Identify Shared Values.**

This begins with helping employees identify their personal values. Research by James Kouzes and Barry Posner, authors of *The Leadership Challenge*,⁴ indicates that commitment to an organization differs significantly based on the clarity of an individual's personal values. They also found that people feel differently about the organization when a team shares clear, strong values. These shared values foster teamwork, promote strong norms, and reduce tension and conflict.

CONCLUSIONS

Keep in mind that the best strategy for leading your employees is to know each person as an individual. Avoid stereotyping and making assumptions. Leadership is all about relationships, so the better your relationship with each person, the better you will know how to communicate, coach, motivate, challenge, and guide them. ■

Notes

1. Simon & Schuster, 1999.
2. Quoting a 2007 poll by Maritz.
3. Quoting a 2008 study by Towers Perrin.
4. Jossey-Bass, 1997.

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