People are perceived as leaders when their intentions and actions are informed by a desire to enhance the lives of others through individual relationships, business outcomes, community change, and so on.

“If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader.”

— John Quincy Adams

Developing leadership is not an easy task. And before one can help others to become leaders, it is necessary to define the concept — which is not an easy task, either. It is not a term one can apply to oneself, but a concept based on the perception of others. Managing others does not necessarily make someone a leader, either. There are many characteristics that make people successful individual contributors and team members, but leadership requires a larger definition of oneself and one’s place in an organization. People are perceived as leaders when their intentions and actions are informed by a desire to enhance the lives of others through individual relationships, business outcomes, community change, and so on.

THE KEY CHARACTERISTICS

Courage. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair famously said, “The art of leadership is saying no, not yes. It is very easy to say yes.” Leadership shines during times of adversity because that is when the courage to take an unpopular stance is most needed. Being honest and making tough decisions does not always make people feel good. Leadership is not for the meek. People often claim positions of leadership, but then do nothing when the tough times arrive, abdicating responsibility, throwing their hands up and saying there was nothing they could do.

Discipline. Leadership requires discipline — a consistency in values, actions, and language. To be a leader, one must practice the behaviors required for effective leadership. The key word is “practice.” The average manager receives five days of training per year, with little or no follow up to establish the skills taught in these sessions. There are few, if any, expectations that managers will actually apply these skills on the job. These managers are about as likely to be leaders as someone who takes a week-long guitar class is to be a musician.

Interpersonal Abilities. Leaders use their interpersonal capabilities to influence those around them. They do not force anything, but rather ask the questions that allow people to think differently about the topic at hand. Interpersonal abilities are revealed in many ways — for instance, effective listening instills trust; strong written and oral communication establishes credibility. Being able to read people and adjust one’s style based on the body language of others creates an environment of candor and openness. All of these skills allow for solid, ongoing relationships, which in turn provide partnerships and the foundation by which work gets done.

Interpersonal ability is often described as a soft skill, but soft skills are at
least as essential to personal and organizational success as technical skills. Leaders must be capable of influencing the people who report to them, other managers, higher-ups, other members of the community — the list is endless.

Interpersonal savvy also requires self-awareness, a personal, implicit understanding of one’s strengths and weaknesses. Leaders must be willing to see the things in themselves that need to be changed, realize how these blind spots and biases affect their perceptions and decision making, and then set about changing them. Self-awareness allows people to make themselves better.

**Making It Happen.** Leaders have a reputation of doing what they say they will do. This is the evidence, the proof, and the baseline for trust and credibility. Someone who does not get the work done does not have credibility as a professional.

At the same time, the occasional spot of incompetence is not necessarily a bad thing. People need to take risks, learn new skills, try new things, or start new jobs. The important thing is to keep a firm grasp on one’s limitations and acknowledge them. People who are expanding their abilities or making transitions can avoid damaging their credibility by being careful about making promises regarding new areas of expertise.

**Humility.** Leaders do not harbor a desire to shine beyond all others. A leader must be willing to point out the direction of future success and then get out of the way so those who have the skills and abilities can accomplish the goal. A desire for stardom will only thwart this essential goal. A big ego is dangerous in a position of leadership.

**Having some fun.** Humor, creativity, and fun are both allowed and encouraged. While leadership is often serious business, a leader who has a sense of humor and fun fosters an environment of innovation and creativity. Serious times require serious behavior, but not all times are serious, and joy should be as much a part of leadership as focus and discipline.

**ENCOURAGING LEADERSHIP**

The best way to encourage leadership in one’s organization is to model leadership characteristics. As the old saying goes, “a leader leads by example, whether he intends to or not.” If employees are to learn about leadership, they need to see the right attributes mirrored in the behaviors, attitudes, and procedures of the organization.

Helping others become leaders requires coaching, and lots of it. Since leadership behaviors are not tactical skills, there is no one, obvious way to proceed. Remember that there are multiple ways to be an effective leader, and watch for opportunities to learn from those you are trying to teach.

**Informal Coaching.** We provide informal coaching to everyone we come in contact with, every day. The way we greet people, engage in dialogue, ask questions, and listen to answers, all provide insights and feedback to the people we interact with. For example, our biases play out in every conversation, so we need to be mindful of those preferences and preconceptions.

One excellent informal coaching method is to catch people doing something right, then acknowledge and encourage the behavior. When an employee influences others by asking open-ended questions that further the discussion, acknowledge a job well done. When someone appropriately inserts humor into a meeting, show approval by laughing along with everyone else. Small acknowledgements of a job well done do not go unnoticed, nor do disapproving looks or lack of eye contact. To ensure that good behaviors will continue, leaders need to show employees that they saw the behavior, liked it, and want to see it again.

Informal coaching takes place many times every day — during a chat in the hall, a meeting, a planning session, and so on. Coaching takes place during every contact with employees. Therefore, we need to be mindful of our intent, the messages we send, and the behaviors we encourage. Even seemingly subtle actions send a message. For example, one leader — who had a reputation for being an outstanding leader and mentor — sat in the center of the first row to show support for those who had worked hard to make presentations at a large department meeting. This was a thoughtful behavior, and the intent was spot on. But when this person was not sitting in the front row during one of the presentations, everyone got the message that this presentation was not important. The leader was actually sitting at back of the room, paying close attention, but few people noticed. Those who are in leadership roles are watched closely at all times.

**Formal Coaching.** The best way to help employees develop their leadership skills is to combine informal and formal coaching. One formal coaching technique is to create an assessment of the characteristics defining effective leadership for employees to complete, incorporating their thoughts and feed-
back. Employees complete the assessment and identify ways in which they demonstrate each of the behaviors and behaviors they wish to improve, along with opportunities for doing so.

Another successful technique is to encourage employees to ask for feedback about the specific leadership behaviors they want to work on. The more specific the questions, the easier it is to give better feedback. For example, if an employee asks, “How am I doing at being courageous?” the answer might be “fine.” A better question would be: “At our 1:00 meeting, I was focusing on providing a different perspective than my peers. Did you see evidence of that? What were the examples that you saw? What could I have done better?” These questions allow for more specific feedback and also help coaches pay attention to the desired behaviors.

The rule of thumb is that it takes 30 days in a row, with no interruptions, to start a new habit or lose a bad one. Coaching team members to a new behavior or out of a bad one requires tenacity on both sides. Be ready for moments of frustration, and be prepared to support team members when they experience the same. But as employees’ leadership capabilities begin to grow, celebrate them and enhance them. Provide opportunities for employees to use these new skills. It is well deserved and will continue to reinforce their success.

CONCLUSIONS

Helping others develop their leadership potential is a challenging but worthy endeavor. The basic steps are:

- Demonstrate leadership. Strive to be a role model every day, all the time.
- Define leadership characteristics. Have examples and stories of what leaders look like in action.
- Coach employees and provide feedback over and over again.
- Celebrate successes.
- Enjoy the challenge.

Finally, enjoy yourself. You are doing something right for the individual, the team, the company, and the community.

Note


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