



Effectively Leading Through These Tough Times

Do you have any idea what floor you are on?

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By Patrick Sweeney

How can individuals who are aspiring to rise through the leadership ranks of your organization make a real impact? In many ways, it can take the flexibility of an acrobat. If high potential individuals maintain the status quo, their leadership skills won't be recognized. If they rock the boat, others may feel threatened and try to subvert them.

Identifying and developing individuals who have the potential to be leaders in the future is one of the most important challenges facing leaders today.

What is it that enables someone who has real potential to make it to the top?

It is more important now, than ever before, for leaders to know the answer to that

question. Because we are all competing in a game where the rules are changing at lightning speed.

The last year is one that none of us will ever forget.

If your company is like most, you had to shrink to squeeze through the eye of one of the worse storms we have ever come across in our lifetime. And you had to learn how to compete on a completely new playing field.

Your competitors are no longer in your neighborhood or on the other side of town. They are on the other side of the world. And they are awake as you try to sleep.

As leaders, we've all had to learn how to scramble to keep things afloat, while also ensuring that our top performers remain engaged, so that they are not tempted to jump ship.

Yet, ironically, most organizations still have a tendency to dismiss, if not completely discourage, potential leaders.

Why is that?

Often, it is because we are too busy to focus on what is truly important.

Beyond creating a compelling vision for the company's future, leaders need to recognize the potential in future leaders. Then, they need to mentor, coach and develop those who have that potential; they then need to give them increased responsibility, early; and finally, they need to realize that a very different type of leader may be needed for tomorrow than exists today.

There are three very important things that leaders must be able to do in these very tough times to develop leaders around them. First, they need to know their people; then they need to replace fear with confidence and then they are ready to create a culture of collaboration.

Know Your People

First and foremost, leaders have to know that they can only become truly effective by coming to terms with and realizing that they cannot be all things to all people. It is impossible. Who even thought of it? The key is to know your people and to understand who you have on the team, and to surround yourself with people who you get—and whose strengths you can depend upon.

Don't focus on what you don't have.

Focus on the strengths of your team.

And build upon them.

Think about it this way: If you were to describe your team's personality in one word—what would that be? Are they empathic and compassionate or are they competitive and hard driving? Are they organized and structured or are they flexible and spontaneous? Persuasive? Persistent? Goal-oriented? Resilient? Focused?

Once you identify the quality that distinguishes your team, you want to focus on who stands out. And why. You want to drill down and know what each individual brings to the team. What is each person best at? How can you help them leverage their particular strengths? Who are the planners? Who are the implementers? Who shines through as a potential leader? This evaluation process will provide you with enormous knowledge, which is extremely powerful. Because once you know what your team personifies and how they work together, you will be able to determine the qualities that distinguish your top performers on that team. And focus on how you can help them become the leaders to which they aspire.

Doug DiVello, vice president at Central Maine Medical Center, describes trust as being central to establishing a real team – and understanding what distinguishes their top performers, and those who have the potential to be leaders.

“Successful leaders start off by identifying, developing and surrounding themselves with a very capable team. Then they let them know that they truly trust them. Only such a leader, with such a team, can meet today's challenges head on.”

Knowing the strengths and limitations of the individual members of your team, and how they work together, is the only way a leader can delegate and build upon the strengths of each individual in the team. As DiVello says, “Staff respects their leaders if they know that trust exists, and by delegating appropriately to staff, a leader is able to develop a stronger relationship with each individual and with the entire team.”

But real wisdom doesn't just come from knowing your people—it also comes from leaders knowing themselves.

As a leader, you need to know what you are capable of. And what you struggle with.

Then you need to find ways to complement

your deficiencies, through the talents of individual members of your team, and by delegating projects to the right people.

“To be honest, we have to look ourselves in the mirror,” says DiVello. “We have to recognize our shortcomings, but we also have to vocalize and verbalize that those vulnerabilities are there. And it's very difficult for people in positions of leadership and authority to admit that they've got areas of weakness. But it is extremely important. To them. And to their organization.”

Great leaders know who they are, and they acknowledge that every single person that they surround themselves with has a positive role to play. As a result, they are better able to build a team—and future leaders—who complement each other, and lead to the future.

In many ways, the most difficult part of that entire process is for leaders to open up, show who they are—not just their strengths, but their vulnerabilities—and to truly connect with the team of future leaders they surround themselves with.

Replace Fear with Confidence

After establishing a significant level of trust in the organization, a leader's next role,

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particularly in these daunting times, is to replace fear with confidence.

This means focusing on the right messages and, perhaps, changing those messages because the old messages don't work anymore.

Gerhard Gshwandtner, Founder and Publisher of Selling Power, says. "As leaders, we are merchants of hope. We need to create new scenarios and new possibilities. Now is not the time to crawl under your desk and complain about the dire situation in the world. The world is not coming to an end."

We need to let everyone know that we believe in them, that we believe in the future, and that we see a way around the corner.

What do top performers and potential leaders really want in a time of crisis?

They want confidence from their leaders.

And belief that they can help bring about real change.

They want to know that they can believe in who they are following.

And if your top performers and potential leaders don't feel that from you, they will seek it elsewhere.

How can leaders come through on that promise?

"It's time for leaders to really know their people," Gshwandtner adds. "Once leaders truly know their people, they are able to create motivational incentives. So people can, then, move confidently in the direction of their dreams with the company that they're working for. Because they know that their leaders understand what they dream about. A great, enlightened leader creates meaning for everybody."

Collaborate

Once leaders understand their own strengths, know the capabilities of their top performers and future leaders, and replace fear with confidence, they are ready to establish a culture of collaboration.

One of the most important aspects of effective leadership is the power to set a positive, optimistic tone. You have to show that you believe in the people that you surround yourself with.



Skip Cimino, the CEO of Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital, approaches leadership not only from a perspective relevant to healthcare, but also from a big-picture vantage point. In difficult times, such as these, resources are limited, and collaboration, he underscores, is a necessity.

"The issue of having to do more with less is paramount. I don't look at it from a command and control perspective. I have invited the input of every level of our employees in the process of dealing with reductions in resources and how to better deliver service."

So how has leadership changed? Certainly leaders are approaching their people and situations much differently than they would have two years ago. So what is most important for leaders to understand? It is all about leaders being able to understand themselves, and their people—being able to motivate and engage them.

"It's all about teamwork," says Cimino. "It's not about the leader standing in front of the pack. Yes, your responsibility is to help lead, shape, guide and direct. But you can't do that as an individual. It takes lots of people working together to make it happen."

And that's where true leadership comes in. Recognizing the strengths and potential in others who can become the next leaders.

One of the most important aspects of effective leadership is the power to set a positive, optimistic tone. You have to show that you believe in the people that you surround yourself with. Allow them to make mistakes. And that only comes from creating an environment where trust exists.

Leaders need to surround themselves with a team that is comfortable expressing different opinions and perspectives. Otherwise, all they are creating is a sounding board. Truly effective leaders are able to encourage conflicting opinions, while creating collaboration. Leaders have the drive within themselves to motivate people, set a positive tone and engage feelings of confidence in times that seem otherwise.

Cimino adds, "Driving positive views enhances satisfaction among those you are working with. And if you enhance satisfaction in everyone you are working with, you ultimately enhance satisfaction among your clients."

And that is where the true value lies.

Bringing It All Together

Great leaders are able to express their vision in a way that is compelling, and, most importantly, to surround themselves with people who embrace that vision and want to grow to make it real.

The best leaders reinforce the beliefs of the top performers and future leaders they surround themselves with, communicating effectively, sharing who they are, replacing fear with confidence, and building meaningful relationships that lead to true team building.

And the pressure to come through on that promise is on now, like never before.

So, in essence, as a leader during these tough times, your focus needs to be on setting a confident tone, keeping your top performers engaged and replacing anyone who doesn't have what it takes to step up to the challenge.

Leaders owe it to themselves and their company to retain only those people who are—or have the potential to be top performers. Connect with them. Build strengths around them. Engage them to exceed expectations.

And make sure that each of your top performers knows that they are truly valued, that you understand them and that they are your future. ■

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