

Leadership needs to put its money where its mouth is

Leadership is much talked about in organizations. Unfortunately, all too often, actions don't align with words. We say it's important to develop others, yet the demands to get the job done get in the way. We say employees are our greatest asset, but we cut those things they value most when times get tough.

Given this, it was with great delight that I recognized quite the opposite in a client. And while I would love to take the credit for its story, I can't. The client's boldness and honesty came from the organization's leaders, who are more than willing to put their money where their mouth is.

This organization publicly stated the philosophy that guides it in developing leaders, namely:

- Leadership is separate from position;
- An important leadership element is peer to peer;
- It cannot solely rely on supervisors to coach its people; and
- All employees must be empowered regardless of position.

Strong, powerful words, but nothing stunningly new. Where it gets interesting is how the client put these principles into practice.

Leadership is separate from position. True enough. Why is it then, that we typically use hierarchical position to determine who we develop and how much money we invest in them? Not so, in this organization. While it employs almost 10,000 people worldwide, it's developing the leadership skills of employees at almost every level. Interestingly, the group missing is the executive, but that's a separate story. Leadership programs are offered for managers, supervisors and front-line workers, but it's the front-line program that most clearly demonstrates the company's belief that leadership does not reside solely at the top of the hierarchy.

This company also espouses that an important leadership element is peer to peer. Leadership isn't just those at a higher level leading those below, but it can happen amongst hierarchical equals. In fact, some of the most powerful and compelling leadership can occur when an individual starts to lead his or her peers. When peers raise issues, they inspire others to give honest feedback without the shield of organizational power or any sense of hierarchical obligation, demonstrating real and effective leadership.

Yet, typically we develop individuals outside of their peer group, taking them away, then putting them back in. Then we develop the groups through team-building exercises, reinforcing the myth that team and leadership are different. They're not. They are integrated, married through every interaction within the team. Again, this organization goes against the grain. The front-line individuals learn together with their peers, with the explicit goal of deepening the relationship among colleagues. They learn to recognize and respect leadership in others.

We say we want to develop people, but all too often this means developing those at the top and then hoping they pass on similar lessons to those who report to them. While this might work well for technical skills (although don't assume a good manager will also be a good teacher), such an assumption

is seriously flawed when it comes to leadership skills. Too many leaders find it challenging enough to develop their own leadership even to consider similarly developing those below them.

In this organization, the supervisors, who participated in an 18-month leadership program, assume the role of facilitator for the front line. But unlike the day-to-day development we'd expect to occur, the process is highly structured. The supervisors spend four days learning how to deliver and adapt predefined content. Nothing is ad hoc or watered down – the front-line employees are challenged in much the same way as those above them.

And finally, all employees must be empowered regardless of position. Again, true enough. How can organizations be efficient, safe and productive if we don't allow employees a voice? But if we don't give them the skills to raise tough issues, how can we expect them to speak up?

This organization does not blindly expect empowerment to occur. Rather, it has given front-line employees the skills, tools and support they need to speak up. They are challenged, but not forced to lead. Instead of paying lip service to their leadership beliefs, these leaders visibly "walk the talk." Unfortunately, they are an exception. We often hear of loftily held principles, but when the going gets tough all this talk evaporates and with it organizational credibility.

So ask yourself, what is your stance on leadership? And does your organization's investment and resource allocation reflect this? If not, maybe it's time to either change your principles or change your actions.

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