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Conquer Leadership Challenges, Connect with Your Employees EDGE - MAY/JUNE 2005

by Doug Silsbee

The most valuable gift you can offer as a business leader isn't your years of experience, your education or even the vast industry knowledge you possess. The most important gift you can offer your employees is you: your enthusiasm, your creativity and your ambition. These qualities make a leader unforgettable.
Great leaders have an infectious way of bringing out the best in others. They make work fun while teaching employees to be more productive, more resourceful and better communicators.
Unfortunately, even good business leaders can get stuck in a rut. The daily routine can be repetitive and it's easy to slip mindlessly into habits that are not optimal for effective leadership. However, with some simple changes, leaders can add some variety and enthusiasm into their leadership and more fully engage their employees.
The following are the most common challenges business leaders face and ways to tackle them.

Challenge #1: Falling into routines. Routines are comfortable and reassuring, and are usually based on what has worked in the past. Don't forget, though, that every workplace and each employee is unique. By stepping out of your routine, you can take advantage of opportunities that are ripe for change. As a result, your workplace will become more responsive to changing times.
To do this, pick a specific behavior with which to experiment. For example, if you want your employees to take more initiative, challenge them to identify possible solutions to business problems. Look back at the end of each day and write down specific instances when you encouraged this new behavior. Experimentation engages you in learning and interrupts your "same old routine" by redirecting your attention to new behaviors.

Challenge #2: Not staying focused on your task. Distraction results from the fact that our mind processes information much faster than we are able to speak. While in meetings or coaching an employee, we may use that extra processing capacity to think about our after-work plans or to formulate a response to someone's question before they've finished asking it. When our mind gets ahead of us, we lose the connectivity with the person we're interacting with.

The next time you feel yourself jumping ahead or your mind wandering, take a long breath. Feel the air going into your lungs and back out. As you exhale, bring your attention back to the matter at hand.

Challenge #3: Not watching our projections: Projection is the tendency to see our own aspirations in others. For example, we may assume that an employee's reluctance to participate in a meeting is based on apathy or self-consciousness, because we felt that way at one time. In reality, it could be that the employee is having problems at home or experiencing a health problem and his or her mind is elsewhere. When we project, we're not seeing a unique individual. Rather, we're seeing ourselves reflected in the other person.

To avoid the projection trap, ask employees about themselves - their hobbies, activities and goals. Listen to their answers and look for ways in which this person is different from you. Be curious about the differences and learn from them. Let your employees know you are interested in them as people. You will be rewarded with a deeper level of trust and cohesiveness within your team.

Challenge #4: Being trapped in our identity. Identity is how we establish a sense of well-being and competency in the world. We may seek to be seen as an expert, a great listener or a compassionate person. All these are elements of our identity, and we often act in ways that invite reinforcement from others. It's easy for business leaders to fall into the trap of always telling their ideas when it may be more beneficial to ask questions or just listen. Play the role of a student sometimes. Your employee's need to be heard may be greater than your need to appear knowledgeable.

To elicit feedback from your team, create a two-way conversation about the process of learning. Ask your employees which methods are helpful and which aren't, and encourage feedback. Make this a real-time process; don't wait until the yearly reviews. Don't be afraid to make some changes. Adaptability is important to any business and its management.

Make changes today

Identifying our leadership challenges can be intimidating. It's hard to own up to the fact that some of our leadership skills can be improved. So take it one step at a time. Begin by identifying your own unhelpful habits and replacing them with more effective ones. This is both a challenge and an opportunity, and you will soon be rewarded with more enthusiastic employees and more variety in your daily routine. Your leadership skills will be a positive example for others to follow, leading to a more unified and productive workplace.

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