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Shifting Gears



You've had another great year and this time you've been assigned the responsibility of leading your own team. How hard can that be, you think to yourself – after all, what is needed is the ability to articulate clearly what is expected and the results should follow.

But it's now three months into the year and you find that things are not working out as you imagined. You are working late every night and running out of energy. The team is still trying to figure out how to work with you and it seems everything needs your attention. You think to yourself, "Work has never been this difficult, so what's happening here?"

For some of you, this scenario is all too familiar, especially if you are a first-time leader. The problem is while we are comfortable doing the things we are good at, first time leadership calls for allocating our time to not only completing the assigned work but helping others to perform successfully as well. The shift now is moving from doing the work yourself to getting work done through others.

As I reflect on my own leadership experience, I found there are three key areas that a new leader can focus on as he/she takes on a team leadership position:

- 1. Engagement**
- 2. Goal Setting**
- 3. Coaching and Feedback**

Engagement

Engagement is about having strong relationships with your reports through trust and clear communication. Typically, when your reports are engaged, their energy is focused towards shared objectives. They:

- Know the purpose of their work and are constantly looking for better ways to achieve results
- Put their hearts, minds and talents in their work and are good at what they do

- Feel a sense of ownership
- Are energised by their work and willing to do things because they care

A leader's role is to make it easy for his/her direct reports to concentrate on what they do best, and do more of it. You will find that engaged reports tend to get the least amount of focus and attention, in part because they're doing exactly what is required. A new leader may mistakenly think they should leave their best reports alone. Great leaders do the opposite. They spend most of their time with their most productive and talented employees because they have the most potential. How long a report stays and how productive he/she is depends on their relationship with their immediate manager/leader.

In terms of the actual "how to" of engagement, here are some questions you may find useful when engaging with your reports:

- How would you describe the work you do?
- What part of your work have you been enjoying the most? Why?
- What have you learned about yourself in the course of doing your work?
- What specific support would you find helpful?

Goal Setting

Goal setting contributes to engagement as we all have a need to know what is expected of us. The danger of not having this need met is that, more than likely, it will lead reports to feeling insecure and being unproductive. When a leader takes the time to clarify expectations and help reports reach their goals, it shows they care about their reports' growth. It is, therefore, important to let reports know if they are on track in achieving their goals. Successful goal setting is about defining the right outcomes. Leaders define the desired outcomes and help their reports find their own paths toward those outcomes. If an employee is skilled in the task, state what the end product is going to look like, discuss the outcomes with the employee and allow him/her to come up with their own steps. Don't be afraid to let go and check-in to see where your support is required. If an employee is new to the task, direct and guide him/her so he/she can learn the ropes. They will be able to come up with their own steps. Don't be alarmed if you need to, at times, hand-hold for a particular task.

Goals should be:

- Achievable and realistic so reports do not get discouraged and;
- Challenging so reports can maximise their full potential and strive for higher personal goals

Balance is the key. Stretch goals to engage and motivate reports with the thrill of pressure. Bear in mind, however, that an inappropriate amount of challenge may be more than what the employee can handle and may cause stress and burnout.

For the "how to" of goal setting, you can try asking these questions:

- Given the objectives of the team, what might be some on-the-job goals for the next several months?
- Which goals are you excited about?
- Which goals make you anxious or uneasy?
- What opportunities might these goals create for you?

Coaching and Feedback

Once goals are set, employees need to know how they are doing on the job. They need to be recognised for good work and guided in the right direction. Coaching and feedback is also a tool that leaders and managers can use to sustain the engagement process.

Coaching enables a leader to help employees discover more about themselves while they negotiate day-to-day tasks and projects, with the objective of driving their performance to the highest level. Coaching also allows for ongoing interaction with employees with the intention of developing and preparing them for future leadership positions.

Developing people is of strategic importance. People are the only sustainable competitive advantage that a company has over another. If a leader does not provide enough opportunities for his/her people to grow, he/she will lose the best performers.

A common pitfall of a new leader is to mainly focus on opportunities to improve. It becomes frustrating when you have to continue to improve in areas towards which you do not have a natural inclination. According to the Gallup studies, great leaders develop their people based on their strengths and not just weaknesses. Developing based on strengths is a way to engage employees and utilise their full potential.

For the "how to" of coaching and feedback, here are some questions you can use:

- What can you tell me about what's happening with your work?
- What have you tried so far?
- What can be done to change the situation?
- What could be a next step for you?
- How can I help you in moving forward?

Working with and through others

The challenge for a first time leader may seem daunting. It means doing less of what you're comfortable with and moving to the intricacies of managing others – the true test of leadership and the ultimate route to bigger things. The idea is to keep working at it. Start by having individual conversations with your team members, ask questions and get to know them. Get them talking about their work, the associated goals and the support they need to help them to succeed. Try it yourself, you'll be surprised how painless it is to shift gears and enjoy the ride!