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Sharpen Your Tools

Mark Sanborn

Being a Leader

Be More than a Manager Success follows great leaders

Leadership is a buzzword that applies to areas ranging from the corporate world to sports teams to nonprofit organizations. Leadership has always been a critical factor in the success of an organization. Leadership doesn't make a difference; leadership makes the difference in your work and life.

John Maxwell calls it "the law of the lid," meaning the effectiveness and ability of a leader determines how high people can rise and how good an organization can become.

What Makes a Leader?

A leadership title doesn't automatically make people leaders. A title may confirm leadership abilities, but it doesn't bestow them. It takes more than just the title to lead people in the right direction. In fact, the most effective leaders have no titles at all.

In Joe Klein's "Politics Lost," he defines a good political leader by asking three (paraphrased) questions:

1. Is he or she strong?
2. Is he or she trustworthy?
3. Is he or she interested in people like me?

The same three questions define leaders of every type. The first question of strength is about competence and the ability to get the job done. Nobody wants to follow an incompetent leader.

The second question deals with character. If you can't trust a person with little things, how can you trust them with important things? This is a critical integrity question. Leadership is about creating commitment and getting people to follow because they want to, not because they have to follow. Commitment is always based on trust.

The third question is what really makes one a leader: connection. It is relationships that truly motivate others. If you are not interested in me, my hopes and my dreams, why would I follow you?

Understanding Characteristics of a Leader

Leaders focus on solving problems and creating opportunities.

Every organization has its challenges. Leaders are able to respond appropriately to challenges and teach employees how to problem solve and resolve conflicts by example.

Keeping others focused on the ultimate goals and mission of the organization is key for a leader. A leader embraces challenges and uses the issues as learning experiences to help create better solutions.

Future-focused leaders naturally create a positive environment for employees, which results in higher employee retention. Set goals with employees—both organizational and individual—in an effort to connect them with the mission. By doing this, a leader can better understand exactly how employees' personal goals can merge with the organization's goals.

Effective leadership is also about helping people and companies achieve new goals in new ways. Problem solving is necessary but certainly not the most exciting part of leadership.

Much has been said about the importance of vision in leadership. Vision is having a desirable goal of the future. As important as that may be, the more important skill is visioning: getting people to help achieve that view. It isn't enough to see what the future could be; a leader makes a compelling case and motivates others to join him or her in creating it.

Impacting Lives

True leadership lies several steps beyond being a manager. It resides on a deeper, personal level. While a manager's role is to go through the motions and check off duties and tasks, a leader is searching for deeper meaning from within a company and individual management role. For a leader, the job is more than directing employees; it becomes a mission to influence people within an organization to surpass their own potential.

In other words, managers work with people where they are, while leaders focus on taking people to the next level. This, in turn, improves the performance of the individual and the company.

Making the Change from Manager to Leader

A move toward leadership means a shift in power—going from power over employees to creating power with employees. Releasing yourself from all of that control and power can be a rejuvenating and therapeutic experience.

Other areas to focus on as a leader include:

- Maximizing your personal potential
- Learning to properly use resources
- Developing clear personal and organizational visions
- Valuing healthy communication
- Empowering yourself and others
- Serving employees in order to retain and motivate them

It is possible to become the type of leader who is a driving force for change and growth within an organization. Making such changes will bring a new joy and ambition to your career. Developing into a leader and going beyond the management role will require you to boost your creativity and career passion, while significantly improving the overall health of the organization.

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