

leadership instalments

Make Opinions Matter

By Dan Gaynor

I'VE BECOME PASSIONATE ABOUT THE WAY LEADERS treat differences of opinion because I've seen that getting this right can have a truly transformational impact. Opinions can build or break teams.

We start with the idea that we are all individuals so differences are natural. These can be a source of dysfunction or productivity. At the extreme, in toxic cultures, they are treated as threats and strongly discouraged. Autocratic leaders see inquiring or challenging employees as problems. They do not value their contributions and this is the clear message they send. These leaders shut down a valuable resource and because talented high performance employees want to think and participate and feel valued they lose many of them.

They also remove a safeguard that could help them avoid at least some mistakes. Employees can help you avoid pitfalls from time to time if you encourage them to speak up.

The way leaders treat opinions is revealing. It says a lot about whether or not they value employees. In the best cultures, leaders welcome them as opportunities to sharpen their own thinking. They are comfortable having their ideas tested and even challenged. They send a powerful message: Because opinions matter, employees matter. Not surprisingly, this message motivates people to contribute in a great many ways.

Skilled leaders encourage their employees to participate and to share ideas and differences and then they guide the conversations that ensue channelling and summarizing them in a creative decision-making process that values the contributions of others.

There is an important quid pro quo at the heart of this practice. First, leaders should welcome and encourage participation. They should listen – really listen – with an open mind. Rushing to defend our own point of view without listening is the fool's course. They should be willing to adjust plans when it makes sense to. When it doesn't they should care enough to explain why the choice they've made is in the best interest of the team and its mission – once.

Employees must remain constructive in the way they bring ideas forward. And they must accept and fully support each decision their



leaders reach, even when they disagree – this is often easier said than done and it has to be taught. Why? Because when employees don't accept and carry out decisions with their best effort everyone loses the opportunity to really learn whether the decision was a good or poor one. Acceptance also leads to a whole lot less conflict. When you help employees see why acceptance makes sense it will be a lot easier to achieve. Help them see why it's important for leaders to listen and for employees to accept and you're on your way to an important facet of high performance culture.

Problems occur when we discourage employees from this type of participation, and when they refuse to accept decisions. This refusal is usually covert but evident in half-hearted performance. At times, they may even undermine plans by criticizing them with others. When it happens you need to call them on it.

This quid pro quo is important to a healthy high performance team. If we do not hold up our end of the relationship, we discourage others, lose talented employees and make some avoidable errors. Those we lead will find themselves in unnecessary conflict when they do not remain constructive and accept the leader's direction.

Changing the way ideas and differences are treated can transform the nature of relationships between leaders and their teams. Talk openly about it and why it is important. Take on the role of teacher and help your team see why and how this can transform the workplace then walk the talk and set the example.

For more on the fundamentals of building strong productive teams call for a workshop.

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