

Leadership instalments

The Buy-in Problem

By Dan Gaynor

THOSE WHO KNOW ME WELL KNOW THAT THE WORD “BUY-IN” evokes a strong reaction. I’m convinced that while intentions are good the buy-in phenomena is actually behind much of friction and reduced productivity I see as a consultant. Buy-in is really a fairly new thing and I think it’s a reflection on the sometimes excessive emphasis we place on personal freedoms today. But being part of a healthy team means placing team before self and accepting direction. On healthy productive teams, leaders genuinely care for their followers and they too put the team first with each decision. Followers are responsive; they accept and carry out decisions well. But when too much emphasis is placed on buy-in employees may wonder who is running the show.

Just a few weeks ago I attended an international teleconference on leadership. The first three speakers all commented on the need for – you guessed it – buy-in. This thinking has become so ubiquitous that I don’t believe we even question its affect on productivity and job satisfaction. The following day it was refreshing to hear Colin Powell say, he needs people who can offer their opinions, trust him to consider them in his decisions and then not take it personally when things don’t go their way – I liked what I heard. So today, I’m going to challenge this thinking.

I hope to demonstrate that the alternative – fostering acceptance – involves employees in a healthier more productive way. Here lies an important distinction; acceptance is not the same thing as buy-in. With buy-in, subordinates must agree with the leader’s decisions, with acceptance, they need not. The practical reality is that each time an effective productive leader faces a strategic choice a time comes when a decision must be made and not everyone will agree.

My fundamental problem is that buy-in places the authority in the wrong hands – it confuses the relationship. It’s as if we’re saying, “If

they don’t agree with us then we won’t have their support and we can’t or shouldn’t do it.” Both leaders and employees suffer. Leaders get far less productivity and can be paralysed in their ability to get a mission moving. Employees often perceive leaders as weak and end up with friction at work.

Employees won’t always agree with leadership decisions and they shouldn’t be expected to, so let them off the hook with this – listen and consult, but then teach them that acceptance holds the key to productivity and job satisfaction. When they accept a decision and give it their best effort they are much more likely to do work that is appreciated and rewarded – productivity and job satisfaction are natural outcomes.

I also don’t want to confuse fostering acceptance with autocratic leadership. The best leaders care about and consider the opinions of team members – just as Colin Powell describes – in the process. But after they consult they make decisions with the team’s mission in mind and then I believe the best make acceptance not buy-in the prerequisite.

When someone resists direction, pride is often the root of the problem. Skilful caring leaders face this head-on, helping team members see that misplaced pride can create dysfunction, and job frustration. As leaders, we must also be teachers. When encouragement and teaching is not enough, we must be prepared to make change. To allow a dysfunctional relationship is not in anyone’s best interest.

Trust is also essential. When the members of a team care for and trust their leader, acceptance is much easier to achieve.

Let me close by saying that working to build support is good practice, as long as we don’t cross over into the trap of creating the impression that buy-in is a prerequisite. Every leader appreciates it when team members agree, but acceptance is the real prerequisite. When we foster acceptance, from a caring perspective, one employee at a time, we create the conditions for lasting productivity and job satisfaction.

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