

Leadership instalments

THE FIVE QUALITIES OF GOOD DIRECTION

By Dan Gaynor

WITH SUMMER IN THE REAR VIEW MIRROR MOST LEADERS will be focusing more intently on building performance as they move into the busy final run to year end. Nothing affects performance so much as the activities of the leader. This is why every truly skilled leader works constantly on fundamentals. So with this in mind, let's focus on one of the most important leadership fundamentals – providing good direction.

The way a leader directs his or her team is among the most important fundamentals. Get it wrong, as so many autocrats do and you'll discourage people and depress performance. These leaders breed resistance. Direct well and you will build your reputation as a strong and caring leader – you will build commitment, focus and performance. With this in mind let's look at five areas every leader can focus on to sharpen these skills:

1. Seek advice: All skilled leaders seek and welcome advice. The best cultivate a small group of trusted advisors. They know they make better decisions when they consider different points of view. And when you include employees among your advisors you send a powerful message that they matter. You are still in charge, but they will help you make better decisions if you invite their participation.
2. Explain the why: "Do it because I told you to" leadership doesn't work. It's arrogant and it distances leaders from their teams. Your team won't always agree with the reason you made a decision but they will appreciate the fact that you cared enough to share it and they'll be much more likely to accept it and give it their best.
3. Answer questions: When employees come to you with questions, they are seeking direction. Don't evade the answers like so many leaders do, it frustrates employees and it makes you appear weak. You should either provide the answer or help the employee arrive at the answer. If you are not comfortable with the answer yourself, you can always reply that you need a day or two to think it over and then get the advice you need from your boss, but don't stall.
4. Establish clear priorities: This is one of the most common mis-



takes I see. Employees ask, "What is most important?" to which leaders reply, "Everything." Everything cannot be most important. When a leader replies this way it frustrates employees who only want to do the right work. Don't evade this question.

"Everything" is an abdication of your responsibility to direct – when you are asked about priorities make them clear.

5. Be clear: Finally, be clear about what you want. Set clear outcomes for each person. When you've directed, ask your employees if they have any questions. It's one of the easiest ways to achieve clarity and improve performance.

Providing good direction is essential to building high performance relationships at work and it is an area where every leader can improve by focusing back on fundamentals. Every little improvement you make will improve the commitment and performance you receive from your team.

Dan Gaynor

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Take a few minutes to think about how leaders you have worked for met the test of the five qualities of good direction and the way in which shortcomings affected your work and the way you felt about the leader.
2. Which of the five aspects of direction do you think you should focus on to improve?
3. If other leaders report to you what steps can you take to improve the quality of the direction they provide their teams and departments?

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