

Training the New Manager

What every rising star should know.

By Michael Laff

WHAT BETTER WAY to learn how to manage than to see the organization through the eyes of its chief operating officer.

That's what team leaders at Stew Leonard's did last fall shortly after COO Chris Williams was hired. Williams conducted three tours for 100 team leaders, who rank just below assistant managers in a food and dairy retail company. The team leaders got to see what the top executive sees when he visits the stores.

Stew Leonard's of Norwalk, Connecticut, advocates promoting employees in addition to teaching through the acquisition of practical experience. Each month, the company hosts "team leader Tuesdays," a program that teaches the next generation of leaders management techniques that include how to conduct short huddles among employees and effectively communicate with staff.

The organization's four-part management curriculum calls for management trainees to create a new product or program, train in another department, manage projects, and execute a strategic plan with the help of a supervisor.

"We publicize the matrix of experiences that are required for management positions, and it is incumbent upon staff members to know them," says Karen Mazako, Stew Leonard's vice president of human resources. "During annual reviews, we hold our directors and managers responsible for developing their staff."

It is of little surprise that the company is widely respected for its training programs and consistently ranked as one of the best places to work, according to *Fortune* magazine.

People skills

As a new generation of managers prepares to take the reins, a few issues are

clear. While the crop of managers possesses much greater technical savvy than their predecessors and likely possess greater humility to admit not knowing an answer, many lack the fundamental people skills that are needed to effectively lead a staff. And, as long as managers continue to win promotions based on past performance and not on their potential to lead, management training will remain important.

"Typically people get promoted because they are good in sales, production, or finance," says Jerry Hoag, director of the Leadership Center at the University of Texas at Dallas. "They get promoted again and again. Pretty soon all of the skills that got them there are no longer applicable, so it's by the luck of the draw whether they become good managers. And that largely depends upon whether they had good managers before them."

Training experts believe that most training should be devoted to concepts such as project management, delegation and strategic thinking—the kinds of people skills that are necessary to be effective leaders. For managers to be effective there has to be a commitment from ownership to strengthen a manager's weaknesses. This commitment is too often pledged but not implemented.

As organizations expand their scope to perform several diverse functions under one umbrella, it is important for the next generation to learn all of the functions of the business or mission, experts assert. Otherwise, a communications gap develops because staff members from various departments do not recognize how their actions or failure to act affects the entire organization. Leading "across the organization" is another component that should be built into all management training programs.

"I see the same pattern again and again," says Judith Glaser, a New York-

based consultant. "New managers have to have all the answers. They feel the need to demonstrate their ability to do something. They stop asking questions. They begin to act as more of a boss than a leader. It's the main reason most managers need coaching."

Generation Y

Glaser said such forceful styles will contribute to a clash with Generation Y employees, who will not tolerate old-fashioned "rule by decree" managers. In her seminars, Glaser teaches new managers to work with opposite personalities and develop nonjudgmental listening skills so they can listen to staff without making a hasty decision.

Beverly Kaye, a Pennsylvania-based management consultant, says the best management training elements are delivered by frontline managers and not HR staff. It is also preferable to utilize staff to lead training in technical areas, instead of hiring professional trainers. For managers who need training in financial planning, she suggests having the company's chief financial officer lead the course.

She adds that it is necessary to create an open climate where managers can be comfortable taking training in areas where they possess limited knowledge. Many managers, Kaye says, fear admitting that they do not know how to do a specified task, particularly in areas of finance and technology.

"We do enough training, but we don't do enough sustaining," she says. "There need to be systems in place to hold managers accountable for what they've learned. When training is done well, managers will say, 'thank you.'"

Gerry Pulvermacher, a Chicago-based consultant, advocates "action learning," where participants work in groups of three or four to tackle strategic initiatives that their company has not yet explored,

such as designing a product, creating a new service, or moving into a new geographic market. Whatever the case, participants learn to take on all aspects of leadership during the exercise and present the final plan to the organization's senior leadership.

While smaller organizations bemoan the lack of resources to create a management training program, Pulvermacher said that the kinds of exemplary training conducted at Deloitte or Lockheed can also be adapted for smaller organizations.

Gladys Tillmon, second vice president of learning and development at Georgia-based Aflac, says the next generation of leaders possesses greater technical savvy than the previous generation and is more adept at delegating, sometimes too much. However, they do not yet possess the instinct to identify high performers and to develop employees. Too often they put personal relationships ahead of professional judgment, she says.

To develop its own leaders, Aflac offers a rigorous three-day training program for managers, most of whom are in their early 30s. Tillmon says that the most important elements in any training program are understanding diversity, learning various leadership styles, and learning how to lead. Aflac's three-tiered program teaches participants to identify their own leadership style, work with other styles, and plan strategically.

Personal, not professional

If there is a blind spot in the next generation of managers it might be their failure to separate personal exchanges from professional demands.

Bill Lee, a South Carolina-based consultant, advises a lumber industry owner on management issues. The company, while performing well financially, is led by a general manager who struggles with basic leadership skills. The manager becomes too friendly with subordinates, tolerates substandard performance, and often makes excuses for staff, according to Lee. The owner and even the manager himself readily acknowledge these flaws, yet the owner is satisfied with the manager's performance and waves off criticism of the manager as just part of his nature.

Lee says that an owner or senior supervisor needs to sit down with managers and identify weaknesses and commit to changing behavior. Otherwise poor management habits will only continue. Too often, however, Lee says that owners are reluctant to deal with conflict or uncomfortable with performance questions and just avoid them altogether.

Often, new managers lack the practical experience to develop and implement a strategic plan. They have devoted the initial phase of their careers toward implementation—completing tasks or finding more efficient ways to complete assigned tasks. Scott Cawood, a New York-based consultant, believes that the next generation of managers, despite their technical mastery, is made up of poor planners who often rely on themselves to complete tasks and have not proven they can develop a tactical plan.

Inappropriate social skills

Another concern is the negative effects of obsessive use of technology. How well will the next generation of managers communicate with team members in face-to-face situations when they are conditioned to communicating electronically?

"Because of technology the current generation spends a lot of time in front of a screen," Hoag says. "What worries me is whether they will have the soft skills and the relationship skills."

Sometimes the best way to develop managers is to recognize that the best performers do not always make the best leaders. Mike Faith, CEO of Headsets.com, says his company will promote individuals who are not the highest achievers, valuing their capacity to lead more than their ability to complete assigned tasks. The company will also talk employees out of a management position. One of the company's top performers was moved out of management. Yet he remains in high esteem and draws one of the highest salaries.

Along the way, teaching new managers about internal company policy should not be overlooked. Management training should include a thorough review of the employee handbook, according to Brian Drum, an executive recruiter with Drum Associates of New York. Too often, he says,

managers are unaware of company policy in sensitive areas, such as dating subordinates or avoiding inappropriate commentary such as sharing ethnic jokes.

Faith agreed, saying that while HR policies might be obvious, it is important to ensure that no member of the management team could be held responsible for any kind of ethical lapse that leaves the company liable to litigation.

Bypassing management to stay in a comfortable spot may be another unique trait of the next generation. Chris Blauth, a director of Achieve Global, says that when his company conducts surveys about management needs, he discovered that many people are beginning to shy away from the next rung. The challenge of being a supervisor in the age of limited resources carries less appeal.

"We're seeing a trend among digital natives who are turning down promotions," Blauth says. "They already have their Blackberries, and work is hectic enough. They don't want to be answering email at 2 a.m."

A possible advantage for the next wave of managers is they get to develop their own style because no current model exists. A byproduct of the changing generational leadership style is the discarding of the command and control style of management, according to San Diego-based consultant Ben Stephens. No longer will a manager be able to issue orders strictly on his authority. He believes there needs to be a transition whereby the next generation can give direction across departments by understanding the overall goals of an organization and by using influence rather than mere authority.

Michael Laff is an associate editor for *T+D*; mlaff@astd.org.