Open Leader Versus Traditional Leader

Different leaders possess unique, but essential qualities.

By Greg S. Rider

I'VE BEEN THINKING about leadership recently by analyzing leaders I know in a variety of settings—from my experiences in the corporate realm with CEOs and COOs, to the professional realm with ASTD chapter presidents, to the social realm with the conductor of the community choral organization to which I belong.

One aspect of this analysis that has intrigued me is the set of characteristics defining what I simply call an "open leader" versus the "traditional leader." In each realm, I've observed differences in individuals in terms of vulnerability, accessibility, and transparency, and how these qualities manifest themselves in the workplace.

Vulnerability

Being vulnerable is as simple as acknowledging your fallibility. Being aware of and revealing one's emotions can be crucial to garnering the trust of employees and connecting with them. Being vulnerable also eliminates needless barriers and creates strength across all organizational levels.

The traditional leader rarely lets others see the human feelings that live underneath. For many people, this is what being a leader means: being objective and emotionless.

The open leader, however, laughs when something is funny or absurd, and isn't afraid to acknowledge when he's upset, angry, or even a bit anxious. A senior executive I once worked with made a habit of having spontaneous employee meetings after particularly important new business pitches, in which she publicly thanked all the employees who worked on those pitches—whether it was providing data, coordinating information packets, or managing travel itineraries. Expressing her gratitude for everyone's efforts was an integral part of these meetings, whether the pitch had been successful or not. And then she shared whether we won the business and she was clearly very happy, or we didn't and she was disappointed and upset.

Accessibility: Don't hide

The traditional leader may be hard to find because she tends to barricade herself behind the office door. An open leader, on the other hand, operates in view of others. He realizes that there comes a time to step out of the corner office or from closed-door meetings to hear employees' concerns and ideas.

There is a simple and effective way that this can be done. During my tenure as director of learning services at a healthcare communications agency, I helped implement a series of "Breakfast with the President" meetings. Every employee—regardless of job title and length of service—received an invitation for breakfast during the quarter in which their birthday fell. The invitation noted that this was an opportunity to get to know each other, discuss ideas, and ask questions.

By hosting regular breakfast sessions, the president invited employees to come chat, ask questions, and share information about their families and accomplishments. By becoming more accessible, she provided an environment where bagels and cream cheese replaced laptops and BlackBerrys. As a result, employees felt connected to their leader and a part of the organization's mission, and in turn, became more productive.

Transparency: Be open

The traditional leader often tends to simply make decisions. Frequently, much of the information and consideration that went into the decision is not shared with co-workers. This can lead to employees feeling that there may be a hidden agenda and that they are being kept in the dark. The open leader does his best to keep decisions and actions out in the open, explaining the basis on which decisions were made.

How can training professionals best promote the development within an organization of open leadership? Here are four easy ways:

1. Be available. Find periods of time when your chief strategic leader has some downtime, and stop by his office to be friendly, informative, and inquisitive.

2. Be honest. Be honest about both your own difficulties and problems in the workplace as well as about the problems you perceive in the business dynamics around you.

3. Be encouraging. As workplace learning and performance professionals, we are often called upon to boost the self-esteem of employees and lead team-building initiatives. Encouragement in the form of commendations and written or verbal acknowledgements for a job well done promotes continued high job performance.

4. Be ready. Be ready to accept any challenge that comes across your path: Chair a special task force, serve on an HR policy committee, join an employee resource group, or write a white paper

As learning leaders, we can both model open leadership and promote its presence across our organizations.

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