

A Leadership Paradox: Do Less to Achieve More

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The story is familiar: bright, competent and successful executives get promoted to managerial positions based on their positive track record. They see the promotion as a reward for hard work and recognition of superior technical skills, so they consider these to be the key factors to a successful career. They work harder to live up to their reputation and make sure they continue to demonstrate those superior technical skills. In so doing, they micro-manage, intervene in the tasks of their team members, get submerged in work and have no time for their colleagues. In short, they have not assumed their new roles as leaders.

This type of behavior has sadly predictable results.

- It demoralizes the team: team members feel their work is not appreciated, as the boss does most of it him-/herself and practically redoes whatever work is left for them to do.
- It destroys trust: team members feel that everything they do is wrong as it always seems to get “corrected” by the boss; they limit their contributions and avoid taking initiatives. In the eyes of their boss, they become poor performers and the vicious circle is initiated.
- It blocks innovation: as team members feel unrecognized and the boss conveys the message that s/he always knows best, team members take it for granted that any new ideas will be rejected.
- It creates stress: the manager becomes overworked; what little time s/he devotes to team members is spent reviewing their work, most often to point out errors or deficiencies. This usually leads to tension and an unhealthy atmosphere of stress.
- It hinders strategic thinking: engulfed as s/he is in the team’s day-to-day work, the manager cannot see the forest for the trees. S/he is focused on improving efficiency, often overlooking effectiveness.
- It prevents networking: the manager has no time to cultivate relationships with team members or peers and superiors; this is likely to have a negative impact on the manager’s own future career prospects.

TAKE A STEP BACK

A decision to promote someone to a position of leadership will indeed be taken after considering past performance, professional competencies and operational results. But the qualities that made a top performer in an operational role are not the ones that will ensure success in a leadership position. Indeed, leaders should practically forget what they knew in their previous operational roles and take a step back from day-to-day activities. Their new roles call for much less activity in the form they knew before, much less doing. Their goal now is to create an environment in which their teams can operate optimally. Some of their most important concerns should be to establish trust, motivate their teams, communicate effectively and engage with their colleagues. In this context, attitude and behavior take precedence over activity.

TRUST

This is perhaps the single most important success factor for a leader. Trust goes both ways: it relates both to the trust others (particularly team members) have in the leader and to the trust the leader has in his/her team. A leader will not earn the trust of the team without showing trust in its members.

If you are the leader, it is important to delegate, to resist the temptation of doing things yourself because you “can do the work faster or better” than your team members. Remember, there is more than one way to reach an objective or to perform a particular task, and your way may not necessarily be the best one. So let your team members do things their way, keep a distance from the detail of their work and limit your feedback to the really substantive issues. Delegation will increase their motivation and also free more of your time for strategic reflection.

Certain values play a key role in establishing trust with your team members: fairness, honesty, courage and humility are some of the most important. Fairness in rewarding your team members for their performance, honesty to speak the truth (in a constructive and non-offensive manner) if there is a need to improve performance, courage to stick to your principles in the face of obstacles or setbacks and humility to recognize and openly admit your own mistakes (we all make them).

By showing trust in your team members, you will earn their own trust and ultimately that of your peers and superiors.

