

# All for one ...

Team-building is effective leadership style

## Question:

**I'm hearing a lot about the need for leaders to be more approachable. Leaders need to practice an "open door" policy. Leaders need to be less top-down. To me, establishing a level playing field is an important part of all of this. As I lead, I've always tried to be right there with the team. At times, this means that I help individuals carry out a tough assignment, help them get back on-track, etc. To me, leading by example is very important. I try to let people see that I am not above anyone else. My problem is that sometimes I am criticized for being too much of a worker and not enough of a supervisor. I struggle with this because I think I am doing a really good job of supervising. What do you think of my approach?**

## Answer:

The simple answer is I like it. The more complex answer is that I'd like it a lot more if you were surrounded by like-minded others who possess a shared understanding of what you are trying to do.

The approach to leadership that you offer is consistent with the participative or human relations school of thought. You

obviously are emphasizing team process. I don't know from whom the criticism is coming, but my bet would be that whoever it is probably is operating from a different model of what effective leadership looks like. They probably think that leaders need to tell the workers what to do and how to do it. This is a "Theory X" or task-oriented model. It is much different than what you are doing.

Obviously, your approach to leadership is going to work best with individuals who understand what it means to collaborate and work together. Not everyone has this understanding. Not everyone has the interpersonal skills to succeed in this kind of approach. Let's be clear on this point: working in teams takes work.

After all, teams of any kind are unique and complex. Think about what team members must do to work effectively. Among other things, they must iron out personal differences, find strengths on which to build, and balance commitments associated with the team against the demands of their individual work.

Yet, dealing with team needs that surface from pressures of juggling multiple roles ultimately is as important as solving problems, improving processes, or completing the daily work. Quite often, though, teams underestimate their need for formal team development. When a team of any type is working well together, members can concentrate on their primary goals of solving problems or improving processes. In contrast, a team that does not attempt to build relationships among its members will waste time on power struggles and endless discussions that lead nowhere.

"There are undercurrents in team dynamics!" is an observation worth making at this point.

Like undercurrents, team-based chal-

lenges tend to surface around hidden concerns that, if left unchecked, can pull down individuals and the team. For example, expecting to have to participate in a team meeting, can leave some people filled with conflicting emotions: excitement and anxiety, loyalty and trust, nervous anticipation, etc.

Left unresolved, undercurrents – hidden feelings or perceptions – can inhibit the team's chances of performing at its absolute best. Any team must, therefore, devote time to activities not directly related to tasks, but to activities that build understanding and support within the team.

Common, but normally unspoken, issues within most teams include: (1) individual identification in the team (e.g., membership, inclusion, influence, control, mutual trust, getting along, etc.); (2) relationships among team members (e.g., What kind of relationships? What level of commitment? How do the different roles interact? Will communication be open or guarded?); and (3) identity/connection with the organization, department, and other individuals (e.g., strong identification within a work area or department, conflicting loyalties ... team vs. peers, conflicting responsibilities, political undercurrents, etc.).

Just as individuals grow and develop over the course of a lifetime, so do teams. One way to conceptualize team development is to think in terms of a four-stage continuum as follows:

### Stage 1: Forming

During this stage, team members cautiously explore the boundaries of acceptable team behavior. This is a stage of transition from individual to team member status. The leader's authority, both formal and informal, is challenged and clarified.

### Stage 2: Storming

This is typically the most difficult stage

for a team. Just as a scientific approach is used to determine a patient's symptoms and a method for care giving, team leaders need to use "diagnostic" or analytic skills to assess the team and its "symptoms" or developmental areas. Inevitably, conflict regarding the findings and their implications ensues. Conflict resolution is, therefore, a key issue for the team to contend with in this stage.

### **Stage 3: Norming**

In this stage, team members resolve competing loyalties and responsibilities. They accept the team, its ground rules (or "norms"), their roles in the team, and the individuality of fellow members. Emotional conflict is reduced as previously competitive relationships become more cooperative. In other words, as team members continue to practice their new approach, they begin to care for the process more effectively. Confidence and satisfaction build. Team members become more open to giving and receiving con-

structive feedback.

### **Stage 4: Performing**

By the time the performing stage is reached, the team has fully clarified its relationships and expectations. The team can truly begin performing—diagnosing and solving problems, and choosing and implementing changes. Finally, team members have discovered and accepted each other's strengths and weaknesses, and learned what their roles are. Now they can all aim at the same target with equal precision.

In the final analysis, my sense is that by more explicitly identifying what you are doing and why you are doing it and by helping your team to develop a full set of team-based skills, your leadership style will become clearer over time. Others will come to see that you are a team leader, not an autocrat.

So, the prescription is to even more fully establish and instill your team-based

approach to leadership. Work on helping the team and its constituents to better understand how the work is being pursued within your area. Craft a team charter. Develop a team business plan that explicitly links the team's efforts with the organization's goals and objectives. Offer individual and team-based feedback. Encourage team members to become skillful self- and peer assessors.

Over time, the results you obtain will speak volumes about how well you are doing.



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