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Communication is critical

Technical skills not enough for managers

Question:

“Many of my co-workers have engineering or other technical backgrounds. I’ve noticed that it’s hard for some of them to make the move from independent contributor to manager because their communication skills don’t seem to have kept pace with their technical skills. They seem more comfortable doing the work than helping others do the work. Now, this isn’t true in every instance, but the tendency seems to be toward “black and white” messages, consistent with a strong facts orientation. I wonder if you could write about this issue.”

Answer:

I’m sure many readers can resonate with this issue. Many organizations promote from within, using a process in which the best “doer” is tabbed to be the leader when a managerial vacancy occurs. Stating the obvious, “doing” and “leading” are different endeavors, requiring different approaches and competencies.

The best contributor does not always make the best leader, as we all know simply by looking at the history of top-flight athletes who have been given a shot at managing or coaching. The list of people who’ve successfully managed the transition is short. Pat Summit, the terrific women’s basketball coach at the University of Tennessee comes quickly to mind.

Conversely, the list of unsuccessful transitions is lengthy, including some of the biggest names, including baseball players like Babe Ruth and Ted Williams, football players like Bart Starr and Herman Edwards, and basketball players like Isiah Thomas and Earvin “Magic” Johnson.

The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) has documented that in terms of “rising star” leaders with whom they have worked who later became “plummeting comets,” 80 percent of them share a com-

mon Achilles’ heel: an “interpersonal flaw or deficit.” So, this is a common, widespread challenge.

Think about it for a moment. Effective communication is a skill that can be used in many one-on-one or group conversations, discussions, etc. in the workplace, including:

- » Coaching/counseling
- » Problem solving
- » Conflict resolution
- » Negotiating
- » Interviewing
- » Performance appraisals
- » Project management

Let’s take a look at each of these applications in some detail.

■ Coaching/counseling

Managers have many responsibilities. Coaching is among the most important.

Coaches listen completely. They resist the temptation to give instant advice or answers. They give the individual time to get a point out fully, and they resist physical barriers (e.g., phone calls, e-mails etc.). When coaching is underway, the most important gift a coach gives is complete attention through active listen-

ing (i.e., “tuning-in” completely).

■ Problem solving

During problem solving, whether in a group or one-on-one situation, there is always a need for active listening. Through the problem solving process you will discuss the present situation, causes, and desired situation. During this discussion, active listening will help to clarify understanding and probe for further explanation. While problem solving, managers can ask others for information or elaboration in order to establish a broad range of opinions about how the problem should be solved or the task should be accomplished. Managers can listen to the responses and clarify through questioning and paraphrasing before responding.

■ Conflict resolution

When people are engaged in a conflict, they are often busy formulating a response to what is being said. They assume that they have heard what the other person is saying many times before so, rather than paying attention, they focus on how they can respond to win the argument. A hint to resolving conflict is to hear the individual out. Let the other person do a great deal of the talking, ask questions in a cooperative way, note areas where the other person is right, invite them to tell more, summarize, paraphrase, and be empathetic with the other person’s ideas and desires.

■ Negotiating

While negotiating, managers can use

“perception check” to reflect in a tentative way what the other party is saying, asking for confirmation for accuracy of the reflection. Managers can practice paraphrasing by restating, in their own words, the other person’s communication. Ask open-ended questions to explore a perspective more completely. Also observe and describe concrete, verifiable actions or words of another without judgment or interpretation. While negotiating, managers can also demonstrate and observe congruence between oral and body language. Paying careful attention and listening to spoken and unspoken communication is important.

■ Interviewing

When it comes to interviewing potential employees, managers need to ask effective questions and listen intently. That’s because hiring the right people is central to the continuing growth and success of any business. To control an interview, managers must explain areas to be discussed, avoid jumping to conclusions, listen to the candidate, look at the candidate (i.e., eye contact), and use effective non-verbal communication.

Using active listening, managers can

pick up on topics to probe further, check congruency between statements, and verify understanding of stories and statements.

■ Performance appraisals

During performance appraisals, managers are coaching, problem solving, resolving conflict, negotiating etc. Performance management meetings should include seeking/listening to the employee’s point of view. Only by actively listening to the employee can managers truly understand employees’ feelings, reactions, concerns, goals, and ideas. By using active listening during a performance appraisal, managers can set understandable goals with which both he/she and the employee agree.

■ Project management

Many functional managers also operate as project managers these days.

Managers are expected to carry out operations in such a way as to maximize efficiency, effectiveness, productivity, and the level of satisfaction that customers experience. To manage this level of complexity, managers need effective communication within and between the teams they lead. The more people involved, the

greater the odds of miscommunication. So, as project managers in these dynamic processes, managers need to foster an environment that allows for open and honest communication.

Of course, the prescription in all of this is to make development of interpersonal and communication skills part of the process of leadership development at your organization. While technical skills might get an employee into the elevator car, how far and how fast the car goes is a function of his or her interpersonal skills. Additionally, along the way, it is important for leaders to develop strategic acumen.

Balance between technical and interpersonal skills is the goal. When managers achieve balance, they can effectively confront issues originating in both the technical and human operating systems that comprise the organization’s internal business environment. ■

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