

# Leadership in Three Simple Steps

Leadership is about supporting and building employee morale and productivity. Ultimately, these explain organizational success. Each year we see hundreds of new leadership-related books and thousands of leadership-related articles. But how much of what is new is really new? After reading most of it, I have concluded that there are a small number of things going on that explain the essence of leadership. In fact, all of the thousands of leadership ideas, tricks and tactics that have been discussed really boil down to three simple ideas. To maintain and build high performance organizations you must focus on three core ideas: reduce ambiguity, be fair and stay positive.

## Reduce Ambiguity

People hate the unknown, the unclear and the unnecessarily complex. Thus, an overriding goal is to be clear and specific, cogent and understood.

Think through the many forms of communication you have with your team on a regular basis. Each is an opportunity to send ambiguous and misunderstood signals. When someone receives a 2.3% raise instead of the 5% they expected, do they really understand why? What about when they do not receive the promotion or that spot they really wanted on the new project team? To the extent that they do not fully understand the cause of these outcomes, they will do the one thing you do not want them doing: they will make assumptions. These assumptions are rarely correct. Typically, they are negative and self-serving. All of this is time not spent working productively because you failed to go the extra few steps required to really reduce ambiguity.

With a solid focus on two things, you can greatly reduce ambiguity.

- The first is clear interpersonal communication. This refers to communication that is very specific (e.g., liberal use of facts, dates, examples), genuine (honest, otherwise the vast majority of people sense the truth), confirmed (never assume they understood what you said, verify it) and timely (e.g., delivered as quickly as possible).
- The second part is effective goal setting. This involves establishing performance goals for individuals and the team, milestones and metrics that will be used to evaluate progress, hold people accountable and reward performance.

With great communication and clear performance goals you will go a long way towards reducing unnecessary employee ambiguity.

## Be Fair

This does not mean treating people the same. You only want to treat people identically in terms of creating an environment where expectations are clear and opportunities are open to everyone. Beyond that, your goal must be to use rewards and recognition depending on performance.

To be fair also means to be transparent. Operate above board, avoid playing politics, avoid playing favorites and be sure that people are always clear as to how you made your decisions. Your employees should never be surprised by something you do at work.

One vital key to not only being fair, but being perceived as fair, is to allow people a voice in shaping decisions that affect them. Sometimes this is not possible and you must make decisions very quickly or you must make decisions that are not appropriate to discuss with subordinates. In these cases, you still need to be absolutely transparent. Explain yourself or they will draw their own conclusions (and they will not be accurate).

The ideal, however, is participation – giving people real ownership. When there is time, seek input and take it seriously. Why? When people feel they have actually had a voice in the process they are willing to accept unfavorable outcomes far more than when they do not believe they have had a voice. That is a massively powerful incentive to strive for participation.

## **Stay Positive**

Positive emotions (just like negative emotions) are infectious. Leaders have an opportunity with each and every issue they face to frame it as positive or negative, as an opportunity or threat.

Research tells us that how an issue is framed dramatically affects how people react. The implication for leadership? The glass is half full! I do not mean to imply that you are to avoid conflict or avoid providing needed critical feedback. Simply make sure that you are positive when doing it and that you balance all critical and developmental feedback with a good dose of honest praise. This does not make people enjoy difficult feedback, but it puts them in a better mental position to actually accept and consider what you have to say.

Next, realize that to be a leader is to be a cheerleader. Sports metaphors have their limits, but this one really fits. Leaders must find specific instances of individual and group performance to single out and applaud.

The leader sets the ceiling for positive emotion so take this role seriously. Do cheerleaders only cheer when their team does something great? No. They console the guy who missed the winning shot too. So should leaders. If your goal is to help them learn and continue striving, you have to praise the positive and help put the negative in perspective.

The next time you want to blame, yell or otherwise explode and point your finger at work, remember, leaders have a choice. Great leaders choose to find the positive in every situation.

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