

Keys to Developing Leaders

By Virginia Reeves

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If you know the right basic questions to ask, you can learn a lot about where people want to go. Maude DiVittis, vice president of MTV Networks/Viacom, regularly keeps in touch with her employees with the following standard but effective questions.

1. What motivates you?
2. What are your short term goals?
3. What are your long-term goals?
4. How do your short-term goals fit your long-term goals?
5. What do you need from me?

A good leader knows to dig deeper than salary, title, and benefits. Finding out what interests and needs there are with the family, with a special interest or hobby, with community organizations, and within the work arena are all important areas to find out about. Be interested in the person, not just the work role they are currently involved in.

Short-term goals can quickly change with achievement or changed circumstances. These types of goals will help you understand whether someone is a driven, steadfast, creative, or a behind-the-scenes or in-the-front type of personality. Long-term goals can help you understand where the persons strengths and weaknesses may lie and what you can do to help them with each.

A motivated employee will be more likely to stick around than be looking elsewhere for nurturing and appreciation. Knowing the answers to these questions will help you give them pointers on how they might reach their goal more quickly and easily - with or without your assistance. Demonstrating a genuine interest in their future and personal development makes them feel good about you and themselves and gives you information on how you can manage them more effectively.

I believe that one of the main areas of frustration for many employees is what I term "blindness that managers wear". There are so many people who are either natural leaders or who have assumed the role and proved themselves to be well suited to leading people. They don't have the title but they have the respect and loyalty of others. They influence the direction of the team or organization in a much stronger fashion than the titled leader could ever hope to because they are trusted, looked up to, and liked. Their opinions are sought and listened to. Their ideas are implemented without complaint.

If you are the head of the group by vote or title position, you want these leaders on your side. Include them in higher level decisions, nurture their skills and talents with more responsibilities, and

ask them to be your liaison to keep the lines of communication open between the different levels found in organizations. Everyone will benefit.

To help people learn how to be leaders you have to let them try and let them fail - without recrimination. How many times can you claim success the first, second, or third time you did something new or out of the ordinary? When they succeed - no matter whether it's the first time or not - give them praise and let others know you are proud of their actions and of those who helped them achieve that success. Leadership development is a long-term commitment - it's an ongoing process. Honor their efforts. This is a significant morale booster and loyalty builder.

Chris Widener, speaker, author and President of the firm Made for Success (add .com to see his site and materials) has lots of good articles on the Web. One idea I picked up on had to do with establishing a mentoring program. Chris states: "Get the current leaders to teach the newer leaders. Have them take people along to do their everyday activities. Invest time in them, developing the relationship while they see how it is done. Then let them do some of the work themselves while you are there. As that gets better, then it is time to let them do it by themselves. Once they have mastered the task, have them turn around and mentor others. This way you are developing more and more layers of competent, extraordinary leaders."

The above integrates mentoring, delegating, and cross training. A true win-win situation. In addition, it creates hope in those who observe what is happening that there are real possibilities for them to move out of what they see as a dead-end job into other areas. Education and hands-on learning are both necessary to establish a solid base where people will offer suggestions and take calculated risks.

Leaders recognize and act upon the premise that everyone has something in terms of experiences, skills, and talents that can be offered. Some people have a few mentors because each has qualities or background that the rising star recognizes as being an area where he or she needs help.

Most people have more potential than they realize. Because their skills and talents are not developed through schooling, their own initiative, or job or cultural experiences they never even think about what they could accomplish. Sometimes it takes someone else to see those qualities that are lying dormant. Or, someone who believes that everyone has "hidden talents" that just need to be nurtured and tested.

I saw a movie the other day called "Music from the Heart" with Meryl Streep as a violin teacher in East Harlem. The character believed that music and art are important elements for someone's self-esteem and for showing them they have capabilities they never even considered. It was a heart-warming tale of dedication on her part and the power and creative force that was enabled and then embedded in the children because of the program.

Another idea is to break free of the routines you follow without much thought. If you aren't looking to develop your own skills and talents, the odds are that you aren't going to do it for others either. Suggest that people make a list of daily routines. Keep those that help to find opportunities for improvement and get rid of the hindrances. On a regular basis, break one useless old habit and start a new productive one.

One way to do this in a work situation is to walk in the other person's shoes - in other words, really discover what they do. This may help you uncover needless or overlapping tasks being done. You will become better acquainted with your staff which leads to learning about them professionally and personally. And, if done with honesty and openness, will lead others to want to be a part of a group that helps to expand their capabilities.

In an article written by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner called: The Leadership Challenge - Strategies for Taking Charge, the authors encourage people to seek new opportunities. Developing this attitude helps current and potential leaders to "treat every job as an adventure. Identify those projects you have always wanted to undertake but never have. Ask your team members to do the same. Implement one smaller improvement every three weeks. Treat every new assignment as a turnaround, even if it isn't. A leader who see within the existing group untapped energy and skill and who assumes that excellence can be achieved is what makes a high performing unit. Challenge calls forth leadership. Ask people to join you in solving problems and volunteering creative ideas."

Good leaders understand that they can encourage others to shoot for the stars and dare to dream with a real hope of achieving what they wish for. Inspiring and challenging people to "think outside the box" they have been confined to can sometimes lead to a totally different lifestyle for them. A guiding vision instilled by long-term thinking versus just getting by day to day can make a world of difference in a person's outlook, demeanor, and activities. A friend gave me a card which I have hanging on the wall by my computer. The front cover says: Success is a journey, not a destination. The inside comment reads: It took a lot of commitment and discipline to do what you've done. I'm really proud of you. These words remind me that even when I get discouraged and frustrated, I have tried and succeeded in the past. That means there is no valid reason why my choices today can't take me to the place where I make a positive impact on my tomorrows. I become my own leader.

I hope the above keys help unlock some doors for you and give you the incentive to reach out to develop leaders. Don't see these people as a threat to you, your stature is bound to rise because you stretched your boundaries and offered a helping hand. There have been many proverbs and other sayings over thousands of years about how much you will receive in return for giving. Try it - I think you'll like it.

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