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EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT AND TALENT MANAGEMENT

Creating and Supporting a Coaching Culture

LEADERSHIP IS THE GREATEST GIFT THE workplace offers because it gives you the opportunity to positively influence others' lives and create more leaders in turn. Let's work together to build this muscle, hone this craft, and create this philosophy that helps us excel, immediately benefits those whom we lead, and provides a competitive advantage to your organization. Think of yourself as your company's greatest "talent asset"; you are the profit lever. Now is the opportunity to reinvent, reflect, facilitate, include, and amplify others assigned to your care. It's time to make your world bigger, to expand your line of sight, and to recognize and appreciate the awesome opportunity you hold as a leader.

THE LEADER-AS-COACH MODEL

As a leader, your success is directly measured by the success of those working on your team; their success is your success. It follows that the skills that made you successful as an individual contributor won't necessarily all apply to your role as leader. As a leader, you should strive to create a "coaching culture" that

focuses on selflessness and otherness; a concern that those who report to you grow, both personally and professionally; a dedication to listening with empathy and helping people find their way through their challenges rather than just giving them answers; and a personal commitment to those who have been entrusted to you via your managerial leadership role in your organization.

You might stop right here and think, “Wait. I’m not here to be a career adviser to my people. There’s work to be done, and they’ll need to figure out how to be successful just like I had to figure it out. No handholding and coddling on my team—I hate to say it’s sink or swim, but hey, if it worked for me, it should work for them.” Let’s have another look at your premise, though. While there’s no right or wrong answer, it’s possible that your initial reaction is a bit out of touch with the times. First, understand that millennials and Gen-Z currently make up almost half of the workforce as of this writing, and that percentage will increase dramatically as the last of the baby boomers near retirement around 2030.

What do these younger generations want? Career mentoring and professional development, corporate social responsibility and environmentalism, greater control over work-life-family balance, and a more diverse and inclusive workforce. Do those ideals sound too lofty to you to be real? They’re not. They may be different from previous generations’ priorities of vertical career progression and wealth attainment or even compliance with and adherence to authority and formalized corporate structures. But these values and differentiators from previous generations are valid nonetheless. In fact, they’re actually healthy and well thought out, meaning that if you don’t meet at least some of these needs from a corporate strategy standpoint, you may be left lacking (that is, suffering from premature turnover or lackluster performance).

Further, a quick look at the future of our workforce points to the following key trends:

- As robotics, artificial intelligence, and the gig economy grow, jobs are being reinvented, and people’s expectations

surrounding work, roles, and career paths are changing along with them.

- Fundamental skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, creativity, and emotional intelligence are the building blocks upon which our future economy will rely.

In short, the new economy will require knowledge workers who often know more about their work than their boss does. They'll be easier to manage if you can make room for their intellectual, social/emotional, and spiritual needs and then simply step out of the way as they find new and creative ways to complete their work. A new vision of the benefits of leadership will surely help you here.

Next, if we ignore these generational priorities, especially the first one focusing on career and professional development, we may fall prey to what Patrick Lencioni's book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* points out as culture and individual career killers:

1. absence of trust
2. fear of conflict
3. lack of commitment
4. avoidance of accountability
5. inattention to results

Do you really want to manage in an environment that's identified by those hallmarks? No, demographics is destiny, and this flood of early-career workers is making its priorities and prerogatives clearly known. And rightfully so: every new generational cohort gets its chance to reinvent the way work gets accomplished, and the career and professional development interests this new generation shares may drive future organizational structures and roles significantly.

Let's look at creating a coaching culture together, understanding that we can affect only our immediate areas of responsibility. Don't be surprised to find, however, that if your leadership style is generating concrete results, others will surely follow. Cultures can

be changed from the bottom up—all it takes is a desire and skill set to bring workers and the work they do to the next level. Let's discuss how to do just that.

A NEW CULTURAL CONSTRUCT FOR TODAY'S WORKPLACE

Culture is a popular topic these days and for good reason: working conditions drive everything from creativity and innovation to discretionary effort and self-motivation or else lead to low performance and productivity and premature turnover. It's easy to describe what a healthy culture should look like, but it's much more difficult to attain and maintain one. Culture is simply the way an organization does things in addition to what it encourages and values. Culture encompasses leadership style, multigenerational inclusion, conflict resolution, ethics and morals, diversity orientation, strategic thinking, operational tactics, and so much more. When you get right down to it, though, it's an organization's style, philosophy, and mission all wrapped up into one big corporate personality or persona. Is your organization fun, creative, or innovative? Is it progressive, paternalistic, formal, or nurturing? Is it selfless, connected, compassionate, or judgmental? Is it easy to fit in or overtly cliquish?

The leader-as-coach model influences culture significantly. It focuses on values held by senior and midlevel management that heavily influence the work experiences of teams and individual contributors. And while you can't change the culture of your entire organization yourself, you have the power to create your own subculture in your department or team that influences all members' experiences of working at your company and, more importantly, working for you.

The leader-as-coach model creates a culture of strategic clarity, clear goals and objectives, high expectations for success, and ongoing accountability. It's based on building a relationship of

trust, tapping a person's potential, building commitment, and executing goals. Coaching bases itself on the assumption that everyone can grow and that everyone has the potential to become something better, regardless of the point of departure. It focuses purposely on building trust, challenging paradigms, providing effective feedback, and listening empathically. It challenges people to reframe their point of view, find their own solutions, and set their own goals and achievement markers.

The coaching model stems from the principle of selfless leadership, where leaders put others' needs ahead of their own and expect them to respond in kind. It accepts the premise that no job is great enough for the human spirit and asks a humble question:

How many of you believe you possess far more talent, ambition, competence, skill, and passion than your current job permits you to express?

And understanding that a majority of workers will acknowledge the limitations placed on them by time, resources, and yes—their leaders' personal shortcomings or lack of engaging work—it attempts to help those being mentored to reinvent themselves, execute their predesignated goals flawlessly, and celebrate achievements and accomplishments.

I know, it sounds too good to be true. Yet, while it's not always easy to be this type of leader to your employees, it's something to strive for. It stems from your pure concern for others' well-being. It thrives on your willingness to listen, to have someone's back, and to encourage someone to be their best self—marrying both individual career and company interests. It's about emotional intelligence, active listening, light-handed guidance in which you ask questions more than give answers, and fun and laughter. In short, it's about *otherness*.

You've likely experienced this already in your career but may not have realized it. Have you ever had a favorite boss? Did you work for someone who made you feel like your opinion mattered,

who challenged you to do things you didn't necessarily feel you were ready for, or who otherwise made you somehow feel special? If so, then you had an amazing coach. That person may have been your immediate supervisor, a team leader, or a department or division head, but you can be thankful that you experienced selfless leadership firsthand. And if you haven't experienced it up to this point in your career, don't worry—you will. The question to ask yourself as you continue through this book is, how will you pay it forward? How will you become *that* person to those that follow you? Do you want to be known as a person who is excellent at growing teams, turning around flagging groups, and developing high-potential employees who may not have seen in themselves what you saw in them?

Selfless leadership, emotional intelligence, and genuine care are the ingredients needed to make a coaching culture work. Never forget, the whole world is watching you. They're watching for the gift you're about to give them. Give a gift of encouragement, genuine concern, lightheartedness, and celebration. The culture of your immediate team may not be reflected company-wide, but your team will become the one that everyone wants to work on, you'll be the leader that everyone wants to work for, and results will naturally follow. That's what a coaching culture creates. That's how it changes the personality of the company over time. Best of all, it can start right here, right now, as long as you're willing to be the first domino.

A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE: DISCUSS “BEING A FAVORITE BOSS” WITH YOUR CLIENT MANAGERS

Raising your manager-clients' awareness of becoming someone's favorite boss—a prism that captures employee engagement and satisfaction, discretionary effort, and high performance—is fairly easily explained in a group setting. Ask your clients to describe the

best boss they've ever had. (There's no need to mention names or companies, just attributes of what made someone their favorite boss.) You'll likely get answers like this:

- She always made me feel welcome and like my opinion mattered.
- He challenged me to do things I didn't think I was ready for. He seemed to have more faith in me than I had in myself.
- She cared about my career and professional development. It was because of her that I went to night school to finish my bachelor's degree.
- He always had a calming influence on us no matter how crazy things got. He found humor in things, helped us keep a healthy perspective, and looked for ways to surprise us and keep things fresh.

The next question is a simple one: "Are you describing that person's *beingness* or *doingness*? In other words, are you focusing on what they did or who they were?" From there, the conversation promises to get interesting. The answer, of course, is both. But if you really peel back the layers of the argument, which is it? Your client managers will likely initially agree that it's the person's *doingness*. It's what they *did* that made them so wonderful. But some voice in the back of the room will likely volunteer an alternative choice: It was their *beingness*. It was who they were that made them do what they do. And voilà—like a great executive coach, you will have teased the wisdom right out of them. The lesson, ultimately, is that it's your *beingness* as a leader that counts. In fact, it all boils down to two words: *character* and *caring*. That's what makes someone a favorite boss. As a society, we're constantly focusing on doing—doing—doing, to a point where our hair's on fire and we're constantly chasing our tails. But to be a great boss, you simply have to *be* a certain way. Be the calm; heal the room. And make space for your staff members to gain traction and find ways of their own to motivate themselves.

And voilà—you end up with a very quiet room of client leaders who can now sort your wisdom through their own experiences and determine how they can be that gift to others. That’s what a coaching culture is all about and what it feels like. That’s how you can become the best HR manager your clients have ever had: By giving people back to themselves. By building their self-confidence in leading others. And by letting them know you’re there for them, you have their backs, and they can become someone else’s favorite boss without losing control or respect. Then ask them to do the same with their people and pay it forward. It can be that simple.

Finally, remember that coaching bases itself on asking optimal questions, not necessarily giving people answers. To reference an old metaphor, teach your people how to fish rather than give them a fish. Ask questions like these to your budding leaders and high-potential team members:

- Would you want to work for you?
- If the whole company followed your lead, would you be happy where you took it?
- (In response to an “I don’t know” answer): I know you don’t know, *but if you did know*, what would your answer be?

There are many more, of course, but coaching cultures thrive on career introspection. They help employees see the bigger picture, the thirty-thousand-foot view, so they can compartmentalize and better understand the challenges they currently face. They challenge employees to do their best work every day with peace of mind and encourage curiosity and ongoing learning. And they help build confidence so that staffers feel like they’re thriving and creating real value for the firm. That’s the standard you want to set, that’s the culture you want to perpetuate, and that’s the gift you have to pass onto others. Teach them how to pay this forward in their own careers over time. Model the conduct that you want others to demonstrate, and simply watch how it returns to you.