

Leadership: The Subtle Things Are the Big Things

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Managers manage things, systems; Directors direct people; and Leaders inspire others to accomplish goals, small goals and, in the bigger picture, grand goals such as a company mission or vision. Managing, Directing and Leading are three separate skills and, comparatively speaking, Managing and Directing are easy relative to Leading. Leading takes effort, practice and courage and my experience tells me that most people are not willing to pay the dues to become a Leader. (Please interpret that as a challenge rather than a judgment!)

For decades at Kids First Sports Center, we have considered ourselves students of Leadership above all other business skills and functions. Yet, despite our dedication to Leadership, I sometimes still feel like a newborn babe. However, recently, I had an aha moment surrounding a Leadership flaw that I have long been aware but unable to adequately articulate. This insight wormed its way into my mind while considering a current Employee for a DL (Department Leader) position in our company. For some time I had sensed that this person possessed a quality that, left unchecked, would cause her to struggle in a Leadership role. My Eureka moment came when I identified that quality which allowed me to subsequently verbalize my feelings to the candidate and here.

My discovery: To lead others you cannot be 'one of them' nor can you be 'above them.' (I have not yet reconciled the paradoxical implication that therefore you must either 'beneath them' or you do not exist at all!)

Here is what happened: Previously, while acting in a temporary leadership role, this female candidate was witness to another employee (male) lament how a client had not treated him well. (To be accurate, the employee's lament could not be characterized as destructive, it was, in this case, merely unproductive.) Upon hearing the lament the candidate innocently sympathized with the employee's feelings and BAM, the damage was done! By sympathizing, the candidate became 'one of them,' and by becoming 'one of them' she specifically could not serve as their (his) leader. Once this type of damage is done, is it permanent? Theoretically, no. Yet practically speaking, probably, yes. My experience is, the person who is firmly ingrained in this behavior typically has an emotional need to be accepted that supersedes their ability to lead.

I want to stress how easy it is to inadvertently sympathize with others when doing so is unproductive. In many cases, mere silence can serve as sympathy.

Here is the doom loop: I am a human being and hard-wired with a need to be liked and accepted. In order to be liked

and accepted by you I will sympathize with your unproductive thoughts or words. As a result, you accept me as one of the gang and I'm encouraging you to look to me in the future for sympathy. Later, when I attempt to make a leadership-like decision, because I am one of the gang and am specifically not viewed as a leader, I get push-back. Feeling ostracized, I try harder to be accepted. I become even more impotent as a leader.

Leaders MUST recognize these realities:

Reality #1: Wanting to be accepted and be one of the gang is a natural part of being human.

Reality #2: A person cannot be one of the gang yet also be viewed as a Leader.

Reality #3: The person who cannot reconcile the paradox of Realities 1 & 2 and still remain a caring person should not accept a leadership role.

The BIG question: Is it OK to be friends with employees? ANSWER: Yes, but only if you understand what true friendship means. Buddies sympathize but true friends tell friends when their thinking is unproductive. Just like good leaders do.

Make it a great month! Jeff Metzger





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