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Leadership Tips

Over the years I have always been keen to understand how other leaders have dealt with "challenging" situations, particularly those that aren't necessarily addressed through leadership theory!

The following e-book is the first installment in leadership tips that I have personally found very useful – tips that I would pass onto my younger self who is just about to embark on a career in IT leadership.

Tip 1. Seek first to understand

Stephen Covey covers this principle in "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People". So often a team member or stakeholder will be referred to by others as "difficult" and my personal experience is that is usually not the case providing they feel understood. The key is to let them talk, and sparingly replay your understanding to confirm you have understood them accurately. Once they feel understood then they are usually much more receptive to hearing your perspective and a productive conversation can then be had.

Tip 2. Catch someone doing something right

In my experience most people want to do a good job and if they are not doing a good job it is because they are not clear on what is expected, or they don't have the required skills yet. It is hard to overestimate the importance of catching a person doing something right. This provides a number of advantages including:

- Demonstrating that you are conscious of their positive contribution
- Reinforcing the type of behavior that you are looking for
- Building trust so that when you identify behavior that needs correction, they are ready to actively listen

Tip 3. Bad news doesn't improve with age

No-one particularly enjoys delivering bad news and there is an old saying of "bad news doesn't get better with age". Delivering bad news in a timely manner is key in providing leaders an opportunity to minimize the impact of whatever has gone wrong. Over the years, I have witnessed many situations where someone has held off delivering "bad news" to a leader wishing, waiting and hoping that the problem will be resolved or go away without needing the leader's involvement. More often than not, the decision to delay delivering the "bad" news has exacerbated the problem and limited the leader's ability to remediate the problem with minimal impact.

Tip 4. Right people on the bus sitting in the right seats

It is hard to over emphasize the importance of having the right people in the team doing the right job. This is the key to a leader being freed up to focus on leading as opposed to becoming consumed in firefighting. All too often, leaders will appoint someone into a position that is not a good fit thinking that 'they may work out ok" and "it is better having someone than no one" – this is rarely the case in my experience. Especially for permanent appointments, go for no appointment or a temporary appointment unless you have a high degree of confidence that the person will be a good fit.

Tip 5. Conduct 1:1 meetings

Conducting 1:1 meetings with direct reports is a must and the focus should be on how your team member is emotionally e.g. satisfied, motivated, uninspired, worried, anything going on outside of work that is taking a toll etc. This requires a genuine interest in the team member and tuning in to what is important for them so that you can create an environment that best supports them in becoming their best. A common trap is for 1:1 meetings to become consumed with details about delivery and this is not surprising given it is safe territory for both parties – stay conscious of this trap, the key is to understand what is really on their mind.

Tip 6. Be efficient with tasks and effective with people

The drive for productivity improvements is relentless, do more with less, faster! Being efficient with time is a good start and this can often translate into working through tasks on the "To Do List" as efficiently as possible. Often those tasks include interactions with other people and at times the same approach is applied i.e. let's get this done as fast as possible. Here's the thing, when it comes to people, effectiveness is the key, an effective conversation may be 5 minutes or 30 minutes, time alone is a poor indicator.

Tip 7. Spare 15 mins at either the start or end of each day getting clear on priorities

When commencing a busy day, it can be tempting to just get stuck into it, particularly if team members greet you with some urgent issue upon arrival. Time is such a precious commodity and making the best use of it is really important. Spending 15 mins either at the start or end (planning for the next day) of the day to get clear on your top 2-3 priorities is time well spent. Without investing time to ensure there is clarity then most likely a significant amount of the day will be spent on urgent unimportant tasks or interesting distractions!

Tip 8. Have lunch in the common area (if available)

When workloads are high and deadlines loom, it can be tempting to eat lunch at your desk. There are a couple of reasons why you would normally be best served by eating your lunch with others:

- The most effective way to complete work is through focused sprints i.e. spending hour after hour without having a break is a bit like gauging effectiveness of study for an exam by the length of time studying as opposed to the quality of study.

- Lunchroom or water cooler discussions are an excellent way of learning about what is happening in other parts of the business

- Humans are fundamentally wired for connection and even some brief social interaction like 15 minutes having lunch with others will normally be good for your sense of well-being.

Tip 9. Extend trust

One of the most common traps for emerging leaders is to micromanage. Micromanagement is dysfunctional in a number of ways including:

- Limits the growth of self and others
- Reduces the time a leader has to focus on the top 2-3 problems for the department
- It communicates a lack of trust – arguably one of the most important ingredients for a high performing team

The key here is to progressively extend trust – many managers fail to do this effectively. When trust is not extended then a team member will often 'work to rule" or reduce effort in the knowledge that their work is likely to be re-worked by their leader no matter how hard they try. This situation creates a self-fulfilling cycle where the manager is convinced, they need to micromanage – a poor outcome for all involved!

Tip 10. Talk as if those that are absent are in the room

More often than not people will speak more harshly about someone when that person is not present. Some common reasons for this type of behavior is an attempt to make themselves feel more significant or seeking a sense of belonging i.e. the other person is hopeless so we are both great! There are a couple of fundamental flaws in this approach:

- Even if only subconsciously, most people will wonder what that person will be saying about them when they are not present
- It provides no opportunity for the person who is absent to rectify whatever the problem is
- It helps build a culture of bitching and backstabbing - few people find this an effective culture to work in!

Next time you are about to be critical of someone who is absent, pause and talk as if they were present.