

Practices of Successful (Group) Leaders

Looking for common behavior in success stories as a way to identify practices of successful leaders, Kouzes and Posner (2002) surveyed and directly interviewed more than 500 leaders of organizations and businesses. They found five common practices: challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way, and encouraging the heart. All these practices were common to successful leaders and were exemplified and implemented through specific leader behaviors. These practices are not magical or innate to an individual; they include attitudes, procedures, and skills that nearly anyone can learn and emulate.

Leaders Stimulate and Challenge

A successful leader acts not to protect the status quo but to stimulate and challenge a group or, as described by Kouzes and Posner (2002), to challenge the process. Such a leader explores new ways of doing things and is willing to take risks to assist the group; this leader sees a problem both as an opportunity and a challenge. Mistakes are accepted as a part of learning, and the process of change is experienced as an adventure. Skills of creativity and problem solving are important in this practice. A creative leader seeks many possibilities and is able to look at a familiar situation from a different perspective.

De Bono (1970) describes the difference between lateral (creative) thinking and status quo (vertical) thinking. Vertical thinking is analogous to digging a hole. Once you have started, you continue to dig the hole bigger and deeper. Because of the investment of time and commitment of energy, it is very difficult to give up this space even when it is not working to meet one's purpose. To think laterally is to choose a place that is experimental and uncertain. De Bono's idea of getting stuck in the "hole of familiar patterns" is often referred to as "tunnel vision," or an inability to see new alternatives. For example, many groups follow a set of rules and procedures because "that's the way it has always been done," even when the rationale for the customary way of acting is no longer known. A successful leader knows when to question routine and get the group to act with relevance to the present set of circumstances and group purpose.

It is not necessary for a leader to come up with every new idea or to provide the ingenuity for every shift in direction. Rather, the leader can be a facilitator of creative process, using strategies such as asking provocative questions (such as "What has been your most memorable event today?" or "What would make this meeting most enjoyable?"); setting up experiments (such as every person contributing one object that is in his or her present possession as a way to ascertain a common group theme); and involving people in retreats (everyone could make a sandcastle that represents an ideal concept such as building bridges between different groups of students); brainstorming sessions (such as one focused on how many functions can be identified for a roll of dental floss); or even art exercises that elicit more creative, right-brain ideas.

A leader promotes challenge and change by rewarding those who make suggestions and seek new possibilities. Because a shift to new or different ways of doing things will initially heighten anxiety, a leader must demonstrate that the stress of change can be managed and is an acceptable part of the stimulation for something new to happen. Finally, an important function of the leader is to help a group determine which of the new options and possibilities are truly good and useful ideas to follow. A healthy person and a well-functioning group both have the imagination to create, the courage to change, the resilience to recover from a mistake, and the excitement to continue into uncharted areas.

Leaders Activate Focus and Goal Direction

Promoting and directing a group to clearly identify its mission and purpose is an important responsibility of a leader. Kouzes and Posner (2002) referred to this as inspiring a shared vision. For example, when a teacher begins a class discussion period, the first question could be, "When you leave this class period, what would you like to have accomplished?" It is not sufficient for a leader to impose a goal on the rest of the group members. Successful leaders engage followers in a manner that elicits the personal commitment and energy of each member toward some shared ends. The goals of all members need not necessarily be the same, but there must be a mutual acceptance that all can benefit from the interaction and cooperation of the group activity.

The task of inspiring a vision implies that a leader must have the tools of a visionary. A visionary uses lessons from the past (knowing the pluses and the minuses, the strengths and the weaknesses), identifies the needs and purposes of a group at the present, and can see future possibilities. To inspire a shared vision, then, a visionary leader must be able to bring ideas together in a way that two things are preserved: both the unique aspirations of individuals and the mutual considerations of the group.

How may a group leader inspire a vision that has the greatest opportunity for success? Look at the six factors below that could be considered a checklist for determining an idea's potential for becoming a shared group commitment.

Leaders Support Member Involvement

The third practice of successful leaders is to enable others to act. An old Taoist proverb attributed to the philosopher Lao Tzu says it this way: "That leader is best whom people barely know of, not so good who people obey and acclaim, and worst whom they despise. Of a good leader who talks little when the work is done and the aims fulfilled, the group will say, 'We did this ourselves.'" The emphasis in the most effective groups is to attain a team or "we" atmosphere in which the commitment and energy of all group members is activated. The activity most central to engaging others is to facilitate cooperative and collaborative behavior.

Checklist for Determining Group Commitment to an Idea

?Value or principle-The idea is important to a core belief group membership.

?Credibility-The idea is grounded in evidence of its worth. There is a rational, justifiable basis for pursuing the idea.

?Inclusiveness: The idea is shared so that all members can be a part of the vision.

?Clarity?The idea is communicated with enough illustration to be vivid in the minds of the group members. Clarity provides a common certainty For the context, including purpose, action, and outcome.

?Positive Perspective?The idea is stated in an affirmative way that communicates the hopes and anticipations of members.

?Passion?The idea taps the emotions and the hearts of group members, providing a driving force for accomplishing the vision. Passion can be the zest and enthusiasm that keeps members engaged and prevents apathy and indifference.

Harrison Owens (1997) describes a process called "Open Space Technology" whereby no preconceived structure or agenda is imposed and the leadership empowers the group to self-direct. Open space requires full engagement of the group membership, and it has been found to produce greater investment of members and provide more diverse inputs and creative solutions that speak directly to the needs of a rapidly changing society. Margaret Wheatley(2006) says that the world of today has changed and instead of the chaos and frustration that might occur when organizations try to hold onto an old way comes the opportunity for a reorganization that finds productive creative possibilities starting with the smallest face-to-face groups that all of us interact with in our daily lives.

Leaders Model Effective Behavior

The fourth practice of effective leaders is to set an example for others. Kouzes and Posner (2002) describe it as modeling the way. An exemplary leader emphasizes the importance of action over words. It is the opposite of the parental admonition, "Do as I say, not as I do." Included here are six areas in which leaders can model the way for a group.

- A leader demonstrates behavior that is consistent with a set of values our principles. The leader can clearly identify the principles that a group stands for and then act in ways that will establish, promote, and maintain those values.
- A leader communicates in a manner that is clear, understandable, and up-front. This can be accomplished by stating the purpose and motivation for any group activity or agenda. The leader avoids covert, hypocritical, and ambiguous messages.
- A leader demonstrates a caring and respectful attitude toward others when in face-to-face contact and also shows a sense of consideration and dignity for others outside the immediate environment.
- A leader shows engagement and works intently toward completing the tasks of the group. A true leader energizes a group by modeling the commitment and effort needed to make

things happen, inspiring the group to establish strong norms for hard work and achievement. However, to be productive, a leader must also pay attention to counterproductive factors such as job stress, burnout or fatigue, or emotional tension, and work to reduce or prevent them.

- A leader acts to maintain behavior that reflects fair play and integrity and established standards for ethical conduct.
- A leader models effectiveness, the single most important action a leader can demonstrate.

Leaders Recognize and Reward

An organization will thrive best when there is recognition both for doing the little things that make a difference and for reaching goals and succeeding in major accomplishments. Sincere acts of unselfish kindness, observations and gestures reflecting interest, and acknowledgment of individual uniqueness are all ways a leader is responsive and encouraging to members. Reinforcement of even small steps toward group goals provides participants with incentive and a sense of progress. Recognition may vary from routine acknowledgments such as "That was a good idea" to regular updates or reports on what individuals have accomplished. Personal messages commemorating birthdays, refreshments at meetings, or acknowledgments of specific individual contributions toward special events are also valued incentives to members. On a larger scale, at significant points of the group's life, it is important to have celebrations to note accomplishments such as award ceremonies and "We did it!" parties

References

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