

I'm Someone's Management Style

by Gregory Ferris, Ed D.

As I was paging through the morning paper, my eyes caught an expression used by a character in DILBERT: "I'm someone's management style." An initial chuckle and nod of the head in agreement were followed by a reflection on those who influenced my own thinking and work practices. Perhaps the beginning of one of the many memorable experiences of being influenced occurred in graduate school. Quite innocently, a student asked the professor, "How do you change someone?" Without hesitation, he responded, "You make them think it's their own idea." Recalling that brief exchange and what it meant to me then and means to me now, I realize that in my many years of working with educational leaders, numerous corporate leaders and as a management consultant, I have taken to heart the beliefs of the best of them and made their beliefs and practices my own.

The leadership behaviors I believe and practice are common among the best of them. Successful leaders are high performing, passionate about their work, hungry for knowledge and capable of sustaining positive influence. All of these leadership traits, it seems to me, are underscored by a foundational belief, that, for the general good, successful leaders set out to engage the head, heart and hands of each employee. That is, creating mechanisms, listed below, that repeatedly tap the collective wisdom of the organization.

Creating Purpose: Explaining the Game

If you don't know where you are going, how will you get there? Building the passion for success, effective leaders communicate purpose, goals and processes that lead to success. Employees must clearly see the line of fire - understanding what is to be achieved and how to achieve it, how each of them contributes and the consequence of success. Equally important, the leader provides challenges that build desire and an agreed upon accountability structure. Purpose is drilled down to each employee; each of them having a purpose for work and how they operate with each other.

Mastering the Skills

Although leaders use dashboard knowledge to communicate business information, the under-the-hood knowledge (specific to a job) is far greater and critically important. Employees must have the information and the skill level to accomplish tasks that lead to self-fulfillment and goal accomplishment. Or as a leader once told me, "how can an employee be responsible without information?" Successful leaders make available resources, enhance personal and professional growth. They break down old barriers to success and build employee ownership for problems followed by solutions.

Autonomy: Having Meaningful Influence

Understanding purpose and mastering job-related skills can lead to an autonomous workplace where employees know more, do more and willingly contribute more to the success of the business. Autonomy means giving the employee the discretion and independence to determine how to be most successful at work. Although autonomy is not an instant solution, the practice helps employees feel a greater responsibility for the outcome of their work and have increased work motivation. Therefore by giving employees more autonomy they are better able to use their personal attributes to contribute to work performance.

Putting It All Together

Being someone's management style has had a significant influence on my professional growth as well as practice. The diversity of the influence has generated a blended understanding that the successful workforce of today and tomorrow must be increasingly engaged and prepared to meet the challenges of a dynamic global economy. The successful leader must embrace the beliefs and practices of those leaders who understand that everyone in an organization has value, hopes and dreams. The practice of engagement activates those attributes and leads to a desired direction.