

Leading People Older Than You

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Regardless of how you got to your management position, eventually you will find yourself managing people older than you. I met one manager last week who is the youngest person in her department. That situation is pretty common these days, and it is a scary one for many leaders, especially those who are not well seasoned.

Here are ten tips that will help you be successful at gaining the necessary respect to lead more senior people effectively.

1. The first few days matter most

Actually, the first few hours or minutes are incredibly important because that is when you plant the seeds of confidence or doubt in your abilities. Be authentic and do not play head games with people. Show immediate interest in and respect for the people who will be working for you. Get to know them personally as quickly as you can. Every small gesture of interest in them and their thoughts will transform into credibility for you.

2. Be observant before you try to transform

Many leaders, especially those with little experience, figure they need to impress people with their power or brilliance to get respect. That approach usually backfires. Before you seek to influence how things should be done in the future, you must first understand and appreciate how things have been done in the past. Do not spout out theories you learned in school in an attempt to snow people into respecting your knowledge.

3. Ask lots of questions

Many new leaders make a lot of statements and expect the workers to listen or take notes. Instead, ask a lot of questions. The best approach is not knowing the right answers; it is knowing the right questions and using them wisely.

4. Put the age issue out to pasture quickly

People really do not care if their leader is older or younger than them. What they want is competence, compassion, and integrity. When you show those three things and

respect people for their knowledge, then they will quickly forget that you are 20-30 years younger than they are.

5. Be genuine

Head games are for losers. Be genuine and real. Try to figure out what matters and pay attention to those things. Do not make the mistake of trying to be popular all the time, but also don't be a jerk. Think about the behaviors that you respect in a leader and emulate those. Respect people older than you for the experiences they have lived through, and listen to their stories with interest. Avoid doing a "one-up" on an experience that one of your reports conveys to you.

6. Begin to work on the culture

It is the culture of the work group that governs the quality of work life most of all. Work to figure out what is already working well and support that. Where things need improvement, ask for advice about what people think would work. You do not need to do everything suggested, but you need to let people have a voice.

Work to build higher trust by making it safe for people to tell you what they really feel. In most areas that have morale problems, it is because people are afraid or feel disrespected. Be approachable and be willing to listen deeply to the opinions of others. Make up your own mind what to do, but only after you have internalized and considered the ideas of others.

7. Be sincere, but not overly lavish, with your praise

People can smell a phony a mile away, and they will have no respect if you just try to butter them up in an effort to gain control. Make sure that 100% of your reinforcement comes from your heart. People will know by the look in your eyes if you mean it or if you are just saying it. Mean it!

8. Create a positive culture

Motivation comes from within a person. If you try to manipulate the situation by providing perks in order to motivate the workers, you will fall flat on your face. "Motivate" is not something you can do to another person; rather it is something a person does alone. Work to create the kind of environment where the workers decide this is a better place to work than before. They will motivate themselves in short order.

9. Be humble

People do not warm up to a braggart. Trying to impress them with your Harvard MBA will set you back several years in terms of ability to lead. People relate to someone who

is genuine and willing to learn from them. That attitude is far more effective than trying to win them over with your own prestigious background.

10. Care

There is an old saying that "people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." It sounds trite to say it, but that is really the secret to effective leadership of people who are older than you in years and experience.

Once you have built confidence in you as a leader, the issue of age goes away quickly, and you have overcome a stumbling block that trips many bright young leaders. I grant that it is possible to muscle in and force your way to compliance with an older population. The problem is that compliance is another word for mediocrity. What you need from people is brilliant engagement, and that is what you will get if you follow the ten tips above.

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