

People are People

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

In my work, I consult with management and leader groups at all levels in organizations of all sizes and types. We normally think of each group as being unique. They have their own style, idiosyncrasies, type of work, environment, and goals, yet I have found most groups to have many similar aspects.

In any group, you will find a core of dedicated and cooperative individuals who are there to help and earn a living. They have basically the same hopes and dreams, although each one has his or her unique story to tell. Then you have a few superstars who are really trying to get the most out of every experience. They shine above the others in many ways. Finally you have the slackers and trouble makers. Even though their numbers are less than 10% of the population, these people take up roughly 80% of the time of their managers. They often feel that life has dealt them a rotten hand, when it is really their own attitude that is usually causing their misery.

When I meet with a new management team for the first time, the manager often tells me "we're different here," and yet when you consider the entire group, despite any other differences, they are usually similar to the pattern I described above. It takes me less than 5 minutes to scope out the distribution for that particular group. Usually it is very close to a normal distribution, but occasionally I will find a group that is either much better or much worse than the norm. For those outlier situations, there is often a relationship between how people are treated and how they react. If people are treated well by leaders, the group will be better than average. If people are misused by leaders, then you find a group with more problems.

The people in a dysfunctional team can be made more positive if the leader finds ways to improve his or her own skills. The good news is that it takes people only a short time to become more motivated. The transformation can take as little as six months. The leader would have culled out the cancerous elements of the team to allow the healthy cells to shine through and work up to potential. The leader would have set up expectations and gained the respect of everyone. Trust would be in evidence every day.

Reverse the situation and put a less-skilled leader in with a high performing team, and the team will lose its edge quickly. People will start acting as if they are playing games with each other, and trust will be reduced. In that environment, some problem individuals will quickly surface to bring down the average performance of the team.

I have seen the above pattern work in both directions so many times over the past 40 years of observation that I am convinced there is a causal relationship. If you look around and see a need for higher quality leaders in your organization, it is costing you plenty.

I believe there is a shortage of excellent leaders, but I also believe with the proper mentoring and support, a majority of professional people have the innate capabilities to become good if not great leaders. So what is missing? The real shortage is a lack of mentors for future leaders. Reason: most highly effective leaders are consumed with trying to optimize things in their current environment, and they neglect the activities that would develop other leaders.

If you are not happy with the number of excellent leaders in your organization, ask why there are not more leadership mentors. Get some help to train all leaders not only to be better at their function, but to step up to the challenge of growing other leaders for the future.

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