

Leadership Pitfalls to Avoid at All Costs

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Not everyone is born to be a leader. The good news, however, is that leadership skills can be developed and refined over time, opening the door to career advancement and higher wages for many.

According to leadership expert speaker Terry Tennant, who is a partner and performance improvement manager with the consultancy group Attainment Inc, the first step in refining one's leadership skills is recognizing what constitutes a good leader. "The measure of a good leader is how well their team functions without them," he said.

It is not the easiest concept to grasp, particularly for those who have worked their way up the corporate ladder and tend to rely on tried-and-true technical skills. These people often have a hard time letting go of the day-to-day tasks they've grown accustomed to doing over the course of years. But in the end they must learn to delegate (and not micromanage) because their ability to step into a new leadership role and fully embrace all the responsibility the position entails depends on it.

Avoid These Common Leadership Pitfalls

- » Using the power of the position authoritatively, rather than coaching.
- » Putting out fires regularly, rather than proactively developing long-term solutions.
- » Making decisions employees should be making.



- » Micromanaging employees, rather than helping them develop.
- » Not communicating expectations clearly.
- » Refusing to hold employees accountable for performance.
- » Failing to provide effective performance feedback and training.
- » Assuming what motivates them personally will motivate their employees, too.

"These are all symptoms [of a lack of] leadership development," said Tennant. "Great leaders find out what motivates each and every person they are managing."

Similarly, leaders should look for the root cause of poor employee performance. Many times, the cause can be traced right back to the leader. For example, when employees

aren't sure what to do or why it's important, there is likely a communication problem. When employees know what to do theoretically but don't know how to do the job specifically, there is likely a training problem. When employees don't want to do the job, there is possibly a motivation or incentive problem.

Prioritize and Manage Through Goals

Terry Tennant's business partner and wife, Linda Tennant, said that one of the biggest challenges for many aspiring leaders today is transitioning from a reactive mindset to a proactive one, as it requires leaders to have a plan that prioritizes tasks and has total team performance in mind. Good leadership "recognizes that efficient and effective are two different things," she said. "Being efficient is about getting everything done as quickly as possible. Being effective is about getting the right things done. It's important to get the right things done on the task list."

According to Linda Tennant, high-payoff activities (HPAs) – the six most important activities to which an employee should dedicate at least 80% of their time – should be on the task list. First, however, leaders must identify their own HPAs. Then they will have time to help employees pinpoint theirs.

Leadership HPAs vary from company to company because every organization and circumstance are different. In some companies, leaders will be responsible for certain day-to-day technical tasks. That said, there are some common HPAs that all leaders should include on their priority lists, such as:

- » Achieve business financial goals.
- » Communicate company vision, values and goals.
- » Identify HPAs and key performance indicators and create scorecards for employees.
- » Provide employee performance feedback and coaching.
- » Help employees pinpoint their motivation and determine career and training plans.
- » Develop, document and improve processes.

"These areas are where a leader should spend most of their time," Linda Tennant said. "The focus of a leader is their employees' performance. A leader's job is to make the team more productive."

Once a leader determines their HPAs, the next challenge is to get on track in terms of working in such a manner that they dedicate the correct percentage of their time to those tasks. To achieve this, she advises scheduling blocks of time to plan and work on HPAs – being sure to control interruptions during those blocks of time – as well as delegating low-payoff activities to other employees.

Establish a Delegation Plan

It can be all too easy to assume that employees will never do a job as well or as quickly as the leader, which often makes delegation a significant challenge for many leaders. Simultaneously, the leader may fear being viewed by their superiors as not working hard enough or making a big enough contribution.

Still, effective delegation is instrumental to a company's ability to thrive and grow, as it allows employees to master a larger number of tasks, enabling them to take on additional responsibilities as the company expands. Delegation also helps free up time for leaders to spend on their own HPAs – the real secret to maximizing team performance.

"If a leader can delegate one task that takes half an hour each day to complete, the leader will free up an entire month of time over the course of a year," said Linda. Leaders can start by successfully identifying a task an employee could either do better, do for less time or money, or do for their personal development. "Start with tasks that are pretty straightforward – almost mechanical in how they are accomplished," she added. Doing so will help leaders begin delegating tasks quickly because they will need less time on training and oversight.


Utilize Authority Effectively

Use authority effectively, Terry Tennant advises. By following some basic rules of thumb, it can be done. A leader shouldn't try to be the employee's friend, but he or she also shouldn't want to be the enemy. The focus simply needs to be getting the job done.

Leaders must consistently provide feedback alongside coaching. It is how they help their teams improve. Leaders should never ask if they can provide some "constructive criticism," a popular phrase often used in management because "all the employee hears is 'criticism,'" he said. "Leaders should simply offer to provide some coaching. 'Coaching' is usually viewed as a more positive word because it's about getting better and winning as a team."

It's also important to provide feedback and coaching in a private setting. However, it is OK to publicly praise employees for a job well done. In fact, it's advised. Public recognition when an employee follows through on a commitment is essential to building a self-motivating team.

At the same time, leaders must follow through on their own to build credibility and inspire their teams. "Leaders need a system to ensure that when they say they are going to do something, they follow through," he said.

Finally, leaders must provide clear job expectations in writing. Then, said Terry Tennant, "leaders can provide performance measurements, offer feedback, and hold people accountable. When employees understand what is expected of them it makes the leader's job much easier." 



About the Author

The Association of Equipment Manufacturers (AEM) is a North America-based international trade group representing off-road equipment manufacturers and suppliers, with more than 1,000 companies and more than 200 product lines in the agriculture and construction-related industry sectors worldwide. The equipment manufacturing industry in the U.S. supports 2.8 million jobs and contributes roughly \$288 billion to the economy every year. Visit aem.org.

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