



Leadership as a Relationship

By Dr. Michael O'Brien

In a recent article that appeared in *Human Resources for the 21st Century*, management guru and author Margaret Wheatley identified 7 practices to follow in dealing with the overwhelming change that's taking place in today's business environment.

One of those practices has particular importance to the style of leadership we encourage in our work as executive coaches.

It's the concept of "Leadership as a Relationship." People often think of leadership as a role – or a position - to which someone has been promoted. Instead, we believe leadership is a relationship among individuals.

The better the relationship, the more profound the effect leaders will have on others. In any relationship, the more trusting, caring and honest it is, the more successful it will be in overcoming challenges and facing the onslaught of change we are faced with on a daily basis. Successful relationships are the heart and soul of any successful business.

Successful relationships can overcome the "us" versus "them" mentality that so often manifests itself among employees and management.

Far too often, people in positions of leadership will insist that people follow them. They will demand blind loyalty and punish anyone who doesn't tow the line. These so-called leaders are leaders in title only. When someone is forced to follow, his or her performance is measured by what is expected – instead of driven by what is possible. The status quo may be maintained, but the status quo is rarely enough to survive and prosper in a business environment subjected to the outside forces and technology that change the global landscape daily.

To cultivate successful relationships, leaders must possess the emotional intelligence to not only understand their own motivations and desires as they interact with others, but also the ability to sense what others are thinking and feeling as well.

In today's environment, blind loyalty is a thing of the past. Instead, leaders must insist on individual integrity. They have to encourage people to give their best thinking. They have to ask for diverse opinions and be prepared to find value in opinions that may challenge their own perceptions. Instead of being "followed" into a false sense of security, leaders need to see through insincere platitudes. They need to shun bravado and the limelight and instead, champion the fruits of their relationships.

Leaders need to thrive on the rigorous thinking of others that forces them to act and react and fine-tune their own critical thinking.

One of our clients put it this way – “conversation crystallizes thinking.” Having relationships that encourage conversations - and holding conversations that are open and diverse – ensures that alternatives are brought to the table and evaluated. Otherwise, compliance and complacency will rule the moment and set the stage for failure.

Leaders who have the emotional intelligence to be painfully honest with others and who can express not only their belief in a particular course of action, but also their fears about it, will find others willing to go the extra mile for them.

Leaders who are able to recognize their fears and have compassion for them, will discover their compassion for others. Once everyone in the relationship has developed compassion for everyone else in the relationship, they’ll transcend their personal agendas and act in concert to face any change or challenge thrown their way.

“Leadership as a Relationship” doesn’t stop at the management/employee level. From board members to stakeholders to executive teams to customers – leadership influences every relationship. The most successful relationships are authentic relationships based on mutual trust and understanding.

When leaders are authentic in their behavior, they influence all the relationships they maintain. By demonstrating courage, accountability and integrity, leaders chart a path for others to follow. They can help ensure that the values of the organization are reflected in the relationships they build – and set the stage for sustained success for the organizations they serve.

Contact Information:

O'Brien Group achievemore@obriengroup.us 513-821-9580 1276 Sweetwater Dr. Cincinnati, OH 45215
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