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Leadership - the next level

A strong theme has emerged recently among many of the leaders I've been coaching. It's about the difference between what's got them to where they are now, and what can help them achieve a whole new order of success. The lessons can apply to anyone wishing to expand their sphere of influence in the world. There may even be some parallels for parents whose children are growing (or have grown) up.

To date these leaders have gained recognition through their personal excellence - a passion for competence and high standards. They've worked hard, demonstrated unwavering commitment to their performance in the job. They've managed their teams with great attention and clear direction. But the organisation now needs more. Ironically what holds them back has a lot to do with what's generated their success to date.

Listening to these highly capable individuals it becomes clear that they identify very closely with their work objectives. So closely, in fact, that they have gone way beyond goal alignment - to goal ownership. They identify so completely with their job that others' views of their success (or otherwise) are taken quite personally.

Unfortunately these driven, conscientious individuals can unwittingly create problems when they progress from heading a function to a more strategic role in an organisation. The best way they can raise their game at this level is by letting go. But for them that's not at all obvious and can be a very scary prospect.

A key enabler is having the opportunity to get honest, yet supportive, feedback on the impact of their current approach. Fortunately 360 feedback is a very

powerful way for leaders to get this "reality check". And I have the privilege of helping many of these great people through the process and learn from it. Here are some of the things these fine, well-meaning leaders get told by their colleagues...

"We are being micro-managed"
"She works very long hours - so we all have to"
"He doesn't handle it well when his peers have different views"
"She takes way too much on herself"
"When mistakes are made he takes tasks back off us"
"He needs to build more trust with his peers"
"He doesn't give us a chance to disagree with him"
"She needs to explain the vision more - we're not sure what it means"
"He is very talented but I'm not sure he's ready to take the next step"
"He doesn't realise we can't all go at his pace!"

When leaders assimilate this kind of feedback they begin to appreciate that although they may be greatly respected and often liked, they can be experienced as intimidating. Their style can inhibit the quality of dialogue required for creativity, development and strategic decision-making. Being bright they "get it" pretty quickly. But "doing it" differently can take a bit more than awareness.

A leader really needs to understand their role at this level: it is to be strategic and outward facing, not just operational and internally focused. Proactively building positive relations with peers and stakeholders is vital, as is keeping alert to events in the external landscape that may affect their area of responsibility. To do this they need to free up time. They need to step back and resist doing their reports' jobs for them. The standards that matter are not necessarily one's own but those that the job requires. Good enough is good enough. 80:20 and all that. Furthermore, they need to appreciate that their team members are all unique with different needs, and aren't just units of production.

What often stops leaders stepping up to this new level is fear. It's risky. One's people may, and probably will, make mistakes, they may have lower standards than one's own, things could take longer (in the short term) and one's team might think one is shirking and doing nothing!

So, fundamental to all this is learning to lighten up, to resist the temptation to be the hero with all the answers, to value oneself regardless of others perceptions, and keep things in perspective. To look out and across, instead of just in and down. Stimulation, inspiration and empowerment spring from a compelling vision, clear priorities, a positive, optimistic "we" mentality and creating an

environment where people are supported to do things *their* best way. The rewards can be immeasurable.

Of course all this is very easy to say. Getting there can be quite a journey. Which is why coaching can help so much. And it can start with a few simple questions. If you are a leader (and we all are, in some fashion) perhaps you'd like to have a go:

- Which of your work goals are truly yours to own, and which could belong to others, and simply require your facilitation?
- What price do you pay for owning what you could be facilitating? What would it take to let go?
- And what might letting go free you up to do? What is your vision for yourself?
- What's your strategy to achieve it (do you have one or are you just wading your way through short-term tasks)?
- So what needs to happen?
- What risks could you take? What risks are you actually prepared to take?
- What peer relationships would you benefit from fostering? Who can you connect with? Who could you inspire?
- What would all this look like in your life going forward?

I hope that's got you thinking. My very best wishes for stepping up to the next level and for your journey along the way!

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