

Changing How Leaders Lead to Improve Business Performance

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Transforming business performance means leaders must change how they lead.

When leaders desire to boost business performance and organizational health, their focus turns to what needs to change. What often happens is changes are made, and then the challenge of making them stick for the long-term arises.

Making change stick is impossible if the leaders cannot change themselves.

This realization, and the transition to making lasting change happen, is difficult. Leaders may have years of habits to unlearn.

They must master a fresh way of leading to maintain the momentum achieved for improvements made or momentum gained will be lost, and the organization will find itself right back where it started.

So, what must leaders change?

Three essential behavioral shifts must happen for leaders to experience continuous, long-lasting improvement, and transform business performance. These shifts are:

1. From **providing the right answers to asking the right questions.**
2. From **looking for immediate fixes to finding the root causes of problems.**
3. From **setting general organizational goals to connecting the organization's goals to an individual's work.**

ASKING QUESTIONS

One of a leader's primary responsibilities is to develop employees in terms of skills and career growth and advancement. The only way that this can be accomplished is by taking the time to talk with employees, individually, through providing effective, ongoing feedback and coaching.

Yet often leaders see their primary value to the organization is by providing answers. Some even think that this is what coaching means: see a problem and give a piece of advice to an employee about how to fix it.

Four core behaviors for better coaching conversations are:

1. Listening to understand
2. Asking powerful questions
3. Challenging and supporting employees
4. Establishing the next steps and accountability

Learning how to be a better 'coaching leader' takes time and practice. Yet, ultimately, leaders that practice this way of leading find that when they let go of the idea that they are at the center of problem-solving, by coaching their employees to find solutions on their own they become better, and even more effective problem-solvers: the employees are the ones closest to the problems and understand them best.

This then paves the way for being able to support and delegate tasks to employees on a deeper level.

This is a win-win situation for the leader because it frees them up to focus on more strategic tasks, and the employees increase their skills and career growth potential. Combined, this increases the organizational health of the business.

FINDING ROOT CAUSES OF PROBLEMS

When problems are fully solved, they inevitably return. This time repeatedly spent addressing the same problems creates waste in the organization. It also causes frustration in employees and ultimately erodes profits.

It makes sense to want to solve the root causes of problems. But again, a perceived lack of time and needing a “quick fix” to maintain productivity impedes taking a disciplined approach to finding the root causes of problems, and leaders often cave to the short-term immediate fix to keep things moving.

Yet, this behavior is role-modeling that does not promote solving problems. One way to combat this behavior is to recognize leaders and teams who solve problems and make them stick and to include this in the performance management and development plans process.

CONNECTING ORGANIZATIONAL GOALS TO AN INDIVIDUAL'S WORK

This means translating the high-level organizational goals into practical goals and targets that individuals can work toward each day. Individuals must know exactly what daily actions they take will drive the achievement of goals. Essentially, organizational goals must align with the business unit's goals, which then link to the individual's goals.

Leaders must understand how their peoples' work contributes to the organization's success or failure to achieve their goals.

BUILDING THE INFRASTRUCTURE

Once leaders realize that they must change their behaviors to lead a new way, organizations must put in place a system to continually reinforce the desired behaviors.

Organizations often need to adjust their leadership competency models, performance rating system, leadership development programs, how well leaders develop their people, compensation, and promotions to ensure that they are rewarding desired leadership behaviors.

Some practical ways of implementing this are to take an 'employee pulse' survey monthly to understand:

- the level of support, feedback, and coaching each employee is receiving compared to an agreed-upon standard, i.e. each employee is to receive two hours of one-on-one coaching each month
- how well their leaders are setting direction

- if they are developing team members' skills and guiding their career growth
- how well they are supporting employees to solve problems.

Leaders can then discuss the results of the survey in a monthly management meeting for this purpose, and support and guidance provided to leaders to help them improve.

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Leading an organization to change and improve business performance and health means embodying behaviors that few leaders have been trained to do. Yet helping everyone, at every level to build new skills and capabilities will ultimately transform the organization and boost organizational performance, health, and long-term sustainable success.

What are you doing to shift these types of behaviors into your leadership development efforts?

What steps are you taking to get out of your comfortable area of leadership style and jump into unfamiliar territory?

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