

Compliance Today – December 2018 Rethinking leadership: Are you "people smart"?

by Benjamin Martin, MPA

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Have you ever worked for a boss whose presence seemed to suck the air out of any room they entered? Somehow, they created an environment where everyone is afraid to make a mistake and is approaching burnout. This person can seemingly find fault in anything and anyone, and rarely takes a moment to celebrate their team before resuming their nitpicking. This boss also has control issues, where creativity is discouraged and people feel micromanaged. It's so bad at times that you find yourself anxious about coming to work for fear of having to interact with that person. Perhaps worst of all, they are entirely oblivious to just how miserable they make everyone around them.

Have you ever worked for a boss that you were genuinely happy to see if they stopped in unannounced? You can't quite put your finger on what it is exactly, but whenever this person comes around, you find yourself excited for a chance to show off the work your team is accomplishing. Even more so, you are eager to hear what they think about it — which seems almost always to be positive feedback paired with some occasional sprinkles of constructive criticism. The funny thing is, you find yourself craving the criticism more than the compliments. The comments are often insightful, and you appreciate the perspective. When the boss takes their leave, you can't help but feel incredibly thankful for the time they made to visit and speak with you and your team. You always find yourself looking forward to the next opportunity to meet with them again.

Which one of the two individuals described above would you want as your boss? Neither description offered a promise of money, benefits, or career growth for choosing one boss over the other. Instead, each portrait painted a picture of how one might feel working for such a boss. It turns out that feelings matter very much in the workplace, and asking employees to leave their feelings at home when they report for work isn't acceptable for leading today's (or tomorrow's) workforce.

"More than half of people who leave their jobs do so because of their relationship with their boss. Smart companies make certain their managers know how to balance being professional with being human. These are the bosses who celebrate an employee's success, empathize with those going through hard times, and challenge people, even when it hurts."

– Travis Bradberry, author Emotional Intelligence 2.0

Realities of leadership

Here's what many leaders struggle with: Leadership isn't just an opportunity where we get to do all the things we

want or to tell people what to do and how to go about doing it. Leading is often messy and complicated by the personal problems people inadvertently bring to work. It also involves a significant investment at times, to help others sort through their personal and professional issues, such as divorce, financial problems, or substance abuse issues. Books often paint leadership as a neat and tidy skill set where if you follow a five-step process you'll be successful. But in reality, leadership is full of uncertainty, self-doubt, and criticism. Yesterday's leadership training is neither meeting today's demands nor creating the leader needed to answer tomorrow's challenges.

This isn't for lack of trying. The United States reportedly spent an estimated \$15.5 billion in 2012 toward leadership development.^[1] Too often, leaders fail to develop healthy professional relationships, seemingly incapable of connecting with the hearts and minds of their teams. Best-selling author and leadership consultant Patrick Lencioni describes this ability as being "people smart." People smart is a leader's ability to have "good judgment and intuition around the subtleties of group dynamics and the impact of their words and actions. As a result, they don't say or do things — or fail to say and do things — without knowing the likely responses of their colleagues."^[2] For instance, how would you describe the current morale of where you work?

Are people excited or exhausted? Are they creative or safe? Are they able to constructively disagree or does every discussion lead to more unresolved conflict? Are departments and teams united or divided? Too often leaders dismiss the importance of maintaining morale, because they don't understand what it is or how to measure it:

Morale in its purest form is nothing more than a summary of how people feel about what they are being asked to do. If you can learn to manage feelings better, then you can learn to influence morale more effectively.

How exactly does someone learn to lead or manage morale? Data drives decision-making in today's leadership environment, but is morale a metric your organization considers when promoting or firing? Could you quantify the cost of having poor morale? Turns out yes — and it's quite costly to organizations regardless of their industry.

In the article, "The Cost of Incivility," Porath and Pearson conducted a study of 800 employees across 17 differing industries. They found that when working for a bad boss 48% of employees reported intentionally decreasing their work effort, and 38% reduced the quality of their work. A bad boss for their purposes is someone who comes across as rude, micromanaging, insensitive, or overbearing. Over 78% admitted to lessening their commitment to the organization, and 25% admitted to taking their frustrations out on customers.^[3] How employees feel about their leaders and managers matters.

I think it's safe to say that all of us have experienced at least one lousy boss in our lives. We swore that we would learn from their poor example and never treat people the same. But if that's the case, then why is it that so many bad leaders still exist? There is often tremendous external and internal pressure for managers and leaders to streamline processes and improve efficiency in the name of the bottom line. As such, organizations focus on providing training to items that can directly influence metrics such as time management, how to write performance appraisals, and conflict resolution. As a result, organizations lack training on soft skills, such as how to positively engage difficult employees, creating autonomous work environments, promoting creativity, and maximizing employee engagement and ownership. Quite simply, organizations reap the quality of leaders they take the time to sow.

If a leader fails to connect emotionally with their team, it severely limits their ability to influence them then successfully. This lack of connection creates another situation in which the leader resorts to having to control their team. Unfortunately, in my early days as a leader, I made this mistake often. I assumed that just because I had the authority and say so, employees would eventually have to buy-in. But, if you are reading this, you already

know that's not the case.

Author Dan Cable states that when leaders resort to using control too much with their teams, it can actually “cause leaders to become overly obsessed with outcomes and control, and therefore, treat their employees as a means to an end.”^[4] When you rely on formal power or control too often, your team's behavior will start to change. Creative people once pouring with innovative ideas now fear making mistakes and retribution. People who feel unsafe will begin reducing their contribution and share to teamwork, preferring to bolster their own standing.

Although facts remain important, the ability to influence someone on how they feel about a situation is a leadership skill that will continue to receive emphasis in training the leaders of tomorrow's workforce. This is especially true in the face of firmly held beliefs.

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