Developing the Bench of Future Leaders

As a strong and successful leader, your growth depends on helping other grow. Just as you have your own personal strategy for career advancement, you should be training your successors so that your move upwards can be supported by a loyal and well-trained replacement, fully equipped to step into your shoes.

You may hit unexpected road-blocks that force you to come up with fresh and creative solutions. You are tempted to say, "Let me take care of it. I'll get it sorted out." Don't take the problem away from the team.

Instead of leaping into action and fixing it yourself, try this: Encourage your team to bring you potential solutions when they bring you problems. When they do this, they don't have to be sure they have the right solution — and it may not be the solution you'd come up with — but they've been compelled to think outside their own box. They will often come up with a perfectly good plan before you even need to say anything.

By letting the team feel the responsibility for their own successes, you, as a leader give them a critical opportunity for growth. As a manager, you should be training your team members to push themselves for better work and to deal with the unexpected and not depend on you bailing them out. By doing this, one of them will be ready to step smoothly into your place when you get that inevitable promotion — or make the dreamed-of move to the beaches of Tahiti.

Think about it. If managers take their role seriously, then they are constantly searching for talent. They are encouraging employees to learn. They are sharing knowledge by coaching and mentoring. And they are supporting employee growth and development. Taking this even further, I believe the role of a manager is to identify and prepare his or her replacement.

It also means that managers must be willing to give up control, power and authority to their employees through delegation. Giving employees the ability to make decisions doesn't mean the manager has made themselves unnecessary. In fact, managers who develop their teams to this point are in a better position to showcase their talents to the rest of the organization.

Managers who are afraid to delegate and let their employees have control over their work will never get tapped to do "cool stuff" within the company. They can't chair the special project that gets the attention of senior leadership. Or be a part of the committee that's working on the next "top secret new product" that everyone is dying to know about. They don't have employees that can function on their own in the manager's absence.

Who doesn't want an organization where people are constantly searching for the best talent, so they can train and develop them to assume positions of greater responsibility within the organization?

Developing leaders means that you're training those under you to rise into leadership positions. In many cases, you're training them to do the job you're currently doing.

The Redundancy Argument

The argument is that if you teach someone to do your job, they will be able to replace you and will make you a redundant employee. If there's another employee capable of doing your job, who won't ask for as high of a salary, then you may just end up losing your job to the very person you trained.

Training up your staff and developing their leadership capabilities does not mean they will replace you, but it does make you infinitely more valuable to your organization and it opens up opportunities for you to move up.

A New Perspective on Leadership Development

If you want to be irreplaceable to a company, train your employees to replace you. This will give your company many more qualified, skilled leader's to drive company progress forward. It will also bring up productivity in the workplace, especially when teams are involved because each person is going to feel more responsible for their own work and will be more willing to contribute positively.

Building a Business to Last

If something were to happen to you, what would happen to your business? Is it even obvious who the next leader will be?

Any enterprise that is overly dependent on the owner or the CEO is diminished in value. An organization too tightly controlled by one person does not allow for growth beyond the limitations of the leader.

How to Become Dispensable

Assuming you agree that it is good for the business for the current leaders to become dispensable, then what will you do to implement this goal?

- First, take an inventory of your team and identify those who show an aptitude and attitude that you find appealing in leaders. Desirable traits include vision, results-orientation, comfort with delegation and developing others, critical thinking ability, and integrity.
- Second, identify their areas of weakness and begin working with them on skills that will move them closer to a position of responsibility. This process involves assigning them the authority to make decisions and take action within their sphere of activity today. Differentiate between mistakes of judgment and errors of carelessness. Use the former as teaching moments, and the latter as examples of what you won't tolerate.
- Third, build redundancy in each of your key areas of advice, management, and operations. It is difficult to promote people to new positions unless they also have a successor. Put the burden on them to help you to develop their successors. In this way, they begin to learn what it means to be dispensable themselves.

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