



Make Everyone A Leader

Early on in my career as a corporate fleet leasing manager, a senior mentor said to me, “Every individual within the organization has answers and solutions. The knowledge of the many outshines the knowledge of the few. We need every team member involved as a leader.”

Henry Ford famously asked, “Why is it that whenever I ask for a pair of hands, a brain comes attached?” Ford revolutionized the factory floor with his assembly line, but to him, workers were nothing more than “a pair of hands.”

Ford’s attitude dominated the culture of Detroit for decades even as America’s automotive might grew around the world. Then came the upstart Toyota Motor Company that, with its “lean production” philosophy, dared to challenge Detroit on its home turf. The automotive industry paid attention but, as Gary Hamel noted in his 2007 book, *The Future of Management*, “Amazingly, it took nearly 20 years for America’s carmakers to decipher Toyota’s advantage. Unlike its Western rivals, Toyota believed that first-line employees could be more than cogs in a soulless manufacturing machine. In contrast, U.S. car companies tended to discount the contributions that could be made by first-line employees, and relied instead on staff experts for improvements in quality and efficiency.”

Today, most companies recognize the value of employee empowerment. It’s time, however, to take a further step. In the hypercompetitive, ever-changing world of the automobile industry allowing employees to make a certain set of decisions is not enough to relieve the intense pressure on middle managers especially, who must meet growing responsibilities and accomplish aggressive goals set by C-suite executives constantly looking over their shoulders.

Middle management often absorbs the responsibility to make every day productive. The middle is often the “pillow” where blows land from the top, bottom and all sides. Pressures from executives involve higher-level issues linked to tight margins, competition and unpredictability. At the same time, middle managers must superbly manage everyday issues, such as problem employees, mechanical breakdowns, absences, vacations and union requirements.

Although top-down command-and-control leadership is derided in leadership books, in the real world, faced with piles of challenges and no time, leaders including middle managers will default to barking rapid-fire commands. This inevitably leads to friction with dissatisfied front-line team members who work with little autonomy, little room for input and usually no avenue for creativity.

Simple empowerment here is not enough. Employees must not only make the occasional decisions, they must take full ownership of their responsibilities by thinking of themselves as leaders. The result is a business unit or function that becomes a “team of leaders” and not just a group of subordinates with leader at the top.

A team-of-leaders approach shifts middle managers from the “lonely linear” team leader role to an advisor or coach among a team of leaders. This approach combines the best of collaborative work and individual

engagement. Every team member finds their jobs enriched: even if the goal is operational efficiency, everyone has elevated responsibilities and is given the opportunity to showcase their strengths.

The team of leaders owns the mission or the challenge with which they are tasked. They are naturally driven to do well. No team tries to be second. They are committed to performance and they want exceptional results that will endure the test of time. The team doesn't subscribe to the "that's not my job" mantra. They are empowered to act without asking or waiting for instructions.

With a team-of-leaders approach:

- The entire team becomes responsible for daily performance;
- Accountability becomes directly proportional to responsibility;
- Execution increases;
- Commitment increases directly proportional to involvement;
- It's easier to take on more difficult projects;
- Leader development is continuous; and
- Organizational effectiveness increases.

One company found that the team of leaders approach radically changed both processes and results. They accomplished more in a shorter time and reduced the waste of resources. The team developed and evolved together as a group and began looking at problems as avenues for innovation.

They prioritized, held each other accountable and formed an esprit de corps. Executives realized 20 percent more free time to focus on larger issues because daily chaos was managed at the team level. In five years, the team of leaders approached was credited with saving the company \$3 million.

It's important to recognize that great team productivity doesn't happen by itself. Functionally, your team is already well trained. And you know that enriching their jobs will increase their engagement and efficiency and help you identify potential leaders.

Use that foundation of functional expertise and the desire of employees to be more engaged to begin creating the future. **To get started on teaching all employees leadership, companies should:**

- Ensure that all managers are well trained in coaching and mentoring tactics;
- Develop ground rules and commitment to constructive communication between staff members;
- Allow time to build trusting, respectful, productive relationships among all levels; and
- Allow leadership to emerge, ebb and flow as the team hits its stride. Not everyone is a natural leader, but all will seek to reach their highest levels of commitment.

Executives play a critical role in creating a framework that encourages and supports the team of leaders approach from the top. Time is short and competition is stiff. We need every team member to not only drive but to help steer. Everyone must be thinking, acting and leading as though his or her future depends on it – because it does.

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