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Driving superior performance through exceptional leadership!

From The Fence in My Backyard



A Crazy Little Thing Called LEADERSHIP

By Kevin Cullen

Point 1 - That Nature/Nurture Question Surfaces Again

“If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.” President John Quincy Adams

The debate about leaders being born versus the possibility that one can learn to lead rages on – and it is as relevant today as it has ever been. In addition to my consulting work, I also work at a small Liberal Arts College as an International Recruiter and a part-time Business Professor. I have the privilege of frequently communicating with bright young students who are working hard to establish their professional credentials. I recently had an interesting conversation with an international MBA student from Romania. In the course of the conversation, he stated, *“My belief is that leaders are born, not made and that organizations need to find those ‘born’ leaders.”* Is he right? What do you think?

There will never be absolute resolution to this reflective question, so all we can do is rely on our lifetime of experience, education and training. For what it’s worth, I have personally observed many successful leaders who appeared to be predisposed, but their “predisposition” was combined with their experience, education and training. I have also observed many situations in which young women and men came into professional work situations who seemed to be unsure of themselves and developed into effective leaders in spite of appearing not to have “take charge” predispositions.

I could give you countless examples from my 27-year military career and from my 13 plus years in the private business sector. In a nutshell, I believe that many people do appear to have a predisposition to lead, but without the right experience, education and training, they may never develop those predisposed skills. Conversely, I think there are also people who do not appear to have that predisposition but they do have heart, determination and a will to learn. They too can develop into effective leaders (one last time with feeling!) with the right experience, education and training. Let me add one key factor that is critical to this process of developing leaders – ***inspiration***. Many people have massive potential within them, but they may need an outside influence to help unleash it. We, as leaders, have to find creative and meaningful ways to inspire our employees who we hope to develop into the future leaders of our organizations.

Another key aspect to this discussion is the distinction between leadership and management. Are they synonymous or not? Again, what do you think? I personally believe that there is a clear distinction between Leadership and Management. I also believe they are not mutually exclusive from each other, but are (in fact) mutually dependent for organizational success.

- The definition of Leadership that I choose to work with is *“inspiring people to make a positive difference in whatever challenge they pursue.”*
- My choice for Management is *“establishing and monitoring organizational processes.”*

Please keep in mind as you read further that I fully realize I’m trying to quantify two very subjective conversations. To keep it in the right perspective, I think of the age old quote, *“Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder.”* I’m certain that there will never be absolute clarification on either of these two debates: (1) Are leadership and management the same or are they different? and (2) Are leaders born or are they made?

Organizational leaders need to make clear philosophical choices about how they approach both issues. This is especially true concerning the development of our invaluable employees. As we say in the automotive sector, the employees we serve are *“where the rubber meets the road.”* Our invaluable employees will determine whether our organizations are successful or not.

KC’s perspective: I passionately believe that we can help our employees develop leadership skills if they have the will and perseverance to learn to lead. ***Inspiration is a powerful force!***

Point 2 - What Do You Want From Me!?

“If you don’t know where you’re going, you probably won’t get there.” Yogi Berra

I know this is cliché, but the foundational skill for effective leadership is communication. I am referring to the ability to communicate performance expectations in a way that sets the “performance table” for success. Avoid playing “stump the dummy” with vague expectations and provide employees with crystal-clear expectations and lead them with **their** success in mind. Additionally, leaders need to choose their words carefully and develop a tone that enables them to address deficiencies in a professional and dignified manner. It goes without saying that if they succeed, the organization succeeds.

So what is a “crystal clear” expectation? It’s likely that you have all heard about or even studied one or more of the variations on the S.M.A.R.T. themes. Goals must be:

- **Specific**
- **Measurable**
- **Aligned** (some say Attainable)
- **Realistic** (some say Recordable)
- **Timely** (some say Trackable)

I think that all of the S.M.A.R.T. models and other related theories bring significant value to the table. Sometimes, and especially in this case of setting expectations, what’s most important is having a plan (some plan!) for communicating expectations and sticking to that plan. I have done extensive work in the automotive sector working with retail dealerships over the past several years. The work I do generally focuses on: enhancing the customer experience, increasing sales, developing sales/service skills, team building and increasing profits. One of the key leadership functions we facilitate is our client’s plan for coaching employees. Informal and formal coaching sessions are great opportunities to communicate and reinforce what leaders expect from the people they lead. I will be taking a more in-depth look at feedback in my April 2014 article: *Feedback, what is it good for? Absolutely everything!*

Standards are the basis for all coaching experiences and those standards enable us to determine if people are meeting, failing to meet, or exceeding what is expected of them. In my mind, this is a classic blending of the Leadership and Management skills sets. The management part comes into play by clarifying the specific outcomes, developing processes that drive performance and monitoring what is actually happening (or as I like to say “watching the numbers”). The actual face-to-face communication whether formal or informal is the leadership piece.

Be sure to craft those vital expectations as specifically as you can while also making them as challenging and realistic as possible. Avoid ambiguous goals such as, “*Just keep the customers happy.*” As you develop and communicate performance expectations, I’d encourage you to consider your Key Performance Indicators and the related performance expectations:

- Key Performance Indicator – Waste Reduction
 - Specific Performance Expectation: Reduce waste by 1% per month over the next six months
- Key Performance Indicator – On-time delivery rate
 - Specific Performance Expectation: Improve our current on-time delivery rate of 88% to 98% in 12 months
- Key Performance Indicator – Customer contact after product delivery
 - Specific Performance Expectation: Improve our current % of contacts after delivery from 76% to 100% in the next 6 months

KC’s perspective: Employees need to know exactly what successful performance looks like and that needs to come from leadership. It is hard to find exceptional talent, so we need to set our employees up for success and inspire them as vital members of our team!

Point 3 - Are You Talkin’ To Me!

“People will not remember what you said, they will not remember what you did, but they will remember how you made them feel.” Anonymous

How do we make our employees feel when they struggle to meet the expectations we just discussed? And how do we reinforce the many positive actions we see in the workplace? Is it

appropriate to give them the old fashioned “cage rattling” or dare I say “ass chewing” we have all experienced? Is it really necessary to let adults know they are succeeding? The timing, tone and substance of your messages are obviously critical to how your employees feel about themselves and the work they do. Leaders can truly change peoples’ lives with the right approach and by genuinely caring about them. I’m very proud to tell you about two people who helped me in my early development:

- **Sister Kevin Therese (1967).** I attended Catholic Schools from grades one through twelve. That meant wearing jackets and ties and being taught by nuns - among other things. I know that nuns get a “bad rap” but I had a great relationship with my 8th grade teacher – Sister Kevin Therese. She had a wonderful way of talking with me when I was slacking – which I was known to do back then. She was clear about what assignment I was slacking on and then she gave me guidance and encouragement to get it right. I vividly remember feeling that I disappointed her, but I was hopeful that I could step up and improve. She also reinforced my academic performance when I did well and let me know precisely what I did well. I always remember her telling me that I “had a knack for writing” (although you’re probably questioning that assessment based on this article!). At 13 years old, that specific reinforcement was so good for my self-esteem and it drove me to work hard to do even better. I guess she helped me feel successful whether she was correcting me or praising me. It may seem hard to believe that a 60-year old man can remember his 8th grade teacher and recall how he felt over 45 years ago. Consider that I have a real problem remembering most of my other grade school teachers. Sister Theresa stood out because of how she made me feel even when I was struggling. Do you stand out in the minds of the employees you are leading? Are you making a positive difference in their lives?
- **Technical Sergeant Frank Cornell (1974).** Frank Cornell was the stereotypical “old school Sarge” who was one of my first bosses in my early Air Force days as a plumber. He smoked cigars, cursed frequently and left no doubt when you failed to meet his expectations. Having said that, he sincerely cared about “his troops.” If an outsider messed with us, he was in their face. He may not have been a candidate to teach charm school, but he got his message across and you had no doubt what he wanted. When we made mistakes, he got “in your face,” but he always did it privately and with dignity. It was a cool thing to be part of his team. In 1974, I made a very bad choice and got into a confrontation with a co-worker.

I'm not proud of this, but I struck him in the head a few times (one of my many youthful mistakes). Let's just say that my conflict resolution skills weren't quite developed yet. I got busted, the Air Force took one of my then two stripes and I had to deal with the related embarrassment and disappointment. I layed low for the next few months, entrenched myself in my work and ate my humble pie. After several months, Sergeant Cornell unexpectedly summoned me into his office and asked me, "*Are you ready to be a man Cullen?!*" I just sat and looked at him in a state of confusion. He said that he went to the CO (Commanding Officer) and asked if he could "mitigate" (lessen) my punishment. Unbeknownst to me, he went to bat for me because of how I handled my punishment and stepped up on the job. He finished our conversation by reminding me of the great family I came from, the values they instilled in me, and how proud of me they will be when I earn an honorable discharge. He appealed to my pride at a time when I was not feeling very proud of myself. This was also a very crucial "fork in the road" for me which could have gone very badly with long-term consequences. I got that stripe back, got shipped overseas and about a year later met my bride of now 37 years. I also wound up proudly serving in the Air Force for 27 years as an enlisted member and retiring as a Command Chief Master Sergeant. That man inspired me when I didn't think I could possibly be inspired. He made me feel a sense of pride in myself and what I did. Are you inspiring the people you lead? Are you instilling pride in them and what they do?

KC's perspective: Leaders can address sub-par performance in a tone that is simultaneously assertive and dignified. Communicating with people in a condescending and demeaning tone will only add "fuel to the fire" and demoralize them. To coin a phrase from the medical world, good "bedside manner" is important.

Point 4 – To Lead Is To Serve and To Serve Is To Lead

"When the best leaders work is done, the people say, 'We did it ourselves.'" Lao Tzu

It takes more than just hiring and paying people for them to be successful! Yes, I know that you're probably saying what I hear my young college students say from time to time, "*Duh!*" It amazes me that I still see organizational leaders who expect their employees to deliver

significant performance outcomes without providing them the tangible and/or intangible support they need. I have studied a “boat load” of theories about human motivation, leadership, followership, organizational behavior, etc. One of my favorite theories that I have taken to the “streets of leadership” is Herzberg’s Hygiene-Motivation Theory. Check out this link to learn more: (http://changingminds.org/explanations/needs/herzberg_needs.htm).

Here are some (of many) vital questions that leaders need to ask when self-evaluating:

- Do we have clear company policies (e.g. attendance, behavior, attire, etc.)?
- Do we have a clear chain of command?
- Do our pay plans sufficiently and appropriately compensate our employees?
- Do we provide the right mix of training and education to prepare our employees for success?
- Do we maintain state-of-the-art working conditions (e.g. equipment, work areas, etc.)?
- Do we provide challenging and rewarding work experiences for our employees?
- Do we properly recognize our employees (informally and formally) when they succeed?
- Do we provide sufficient advancement opportunities for our high performing employees?
- Do we offer opportunities within our company for employees to expand their skill sets?

Simply stated, leaders **serve** the people they lead! I’d encourage you to check out the concept of Servant Leadership – an inspiring and satisfying approach to leadership. Here’s a link to an article in the May 1, 2013 issue of Forbes Magazine entitled *Why Isn’t Servant Leadership More Prevalent?* (<http://www.forbes.com/sites/hbsworkingknowledge/2013/05/01/why-isnt-servant-leadership-more-prevalent/>). I would also encourage you to view the Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership website (<https://greenleaf.org/>).

KC’s perspective: In winning organizations, leaders are attuned to what their team needs to be successful and do all they can to provide that support. Take care of the people you lead by giving them the tangible and moral support they need to succeed!