

MENTORING - AN ESSENTIAL LEADERSHIP SKILL

BY ANN ROLFE

Employees thrive when leaders take a genuine interest in each individual, providing honest feedback, opportunities for development and supporting their growth. These behaviours are synonymous with mentoring.

Leaders who use mentoring skills are essential to employee engagement, retaining and developing talent, and aligning and supporting employee's goals and performance.

Employee Engagement

The quality of the relationship a person has with his or her manager is the key to employee engagement and performance. Employee engagement at the business unit or workgroup level is linked to service, quality, customer

loyalty, productivity, employee turnover, safety, merchandise shrinkage and profitability, and managers account for at least 70% of the variance in employee engagement scores.¹

Employee engagement may be the single most important strategic challenge for organisations. Disengaged employees may be passively or actively dragging your organisation down, holding co-workers back from achieving goals and costing the organisation billions. In Deloitte's recent study, employee engagement and culture issues rated as the number one challenge, worldwide.² Not surprising, when in Australia only 24% of workers are engaged, 60% are not engaged and 16% are actively disengaged - and we're amongst the better performers globally.

Developing Talent

Organisations may invest in good recruitment and onboarding, but what happens to enthusiastic new hires? What about the development of existing employees? Retaining and developing talent is not just the job of HR, it's down to the person who leads the work unit. Leaders are uniquely positioned to identify potential in their people, to bring it out, put it to use and develop it. Unfortunately many leaders are not skilled at spotting talent or growing it, some do not realise it is part of their role and others simply don't know how.

It's been estimated that organisations forfeit over \$1 million per year in untapped potential.³ Unrecognised and undeveloped talent exists in everyone and the person best placed to do something about it is the manager or team leader.

The 70:20:10 concept is familiar to learning and development professionals, but line managers are crucial to the success of on-the-job experiential learning (the 70), much of the social (the 20) and formal or off-the-job training (the 10). Without coaching and mentoring only 16% of participants transfer learning in a way that improves performance.⁴

Aligning Goals and Performance

The old, anxiety provoking, annual performance appraisal is not an effective tool for managing employee performance. Well done, an annual review may be a starting point for a development plan, but it is day-to-day interaction with the leader that determines performance.

Humans are naturally goal-oriented. In order to gain satisfaction from work we need a sense of purpose. A leader is someone who can translate the corporate vision, mission and strategy into something meaningful to employees. The leader shows how the activities of each individual and the team contribute to important organisational outcomes. The work has clear goals, each person knows what is expected of him or her and feedback is frequent and constructive. Too many managers focus on performance management directed at under par employees, rather than giving most of their attention to supporting and encouraging those who are most productive.

Obviously people need direction and support when they are off-track but *employees need positive reinforcement as well as corrective guidance*. In fact, the difference between people who flourish and those who flounder is a feedback ratio of at least 3:1⁵ that's three times the amount of positive reinforcement to corrective guidance. A lot of managers struggle with this concept, but positive feedback is like the wind in the sails of a yacht. When the wind drops the boat is left adrift. Corrective guidance is like the rudder, vital to keep the boat on course, but unable to work without positive momentum. 60% of workers say they get no praise, but even the most self-motivated people need the positive momentum that comes from acknowledgement if they are to sustain performance. Leaders use mentoring skills when they give constructive feedback and do so often.

Employees Need Mentors AND Leaders Who Use Mentoring Skills

People need an independent, objective mentor with no other agenda and where authority doesn't get in the way. That's why we choose mentors who are not the manager, or in a direct line of authority above the mentee, in most mentoring programs. However, leaders who use mentoring skills are vital.

Leaders model, they teach values, attitudes and behaviour, they lead conversations that align personal, professional and organisational goals. In short, leaders who use mentoring skills get the best from people. These skills develop employees and their increased capability builds the capacity of the organisation. In addition, most mentors say they get as much from the experience as those they mentor, mentoring is self-development for managers. So shouldn't every leader develop and use their mentoring skills?

References

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