by Benjamin Martin, MPA

Rethinking leadership: Are you "people smart"?

» Organizations reap the quality of leaders they take the time to sow.

» Asking employees to leave their feelings home when they report to work isn't acceptable for leading today's (or tomorrow's) workforce.

» Morale is nothing more than a summary of how people feel about what they are being asked to do. Therefore, how people feel at work is incredibly essential to motivating and creating high-performance teams.

» Leaders earn trust more frequently in small everyday gestures, as opposed to rare, grandiose ones.

» Emotional support is a crucial ingredient in creating employee growth and job satisfaction, which leads to increased retention and recruitment.

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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.

Martin

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.

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.

A leader's call to action

Leaders have an incredible opportunity to be present in the professional lives of their teams and, in some instances, support growth in their personal lives as well. Here are some examples to help you get started.

1. **Service**
   Leaders love to serve people and seek to help them to become more effective; managers love to influence processes and seek to make them more efficient. Avoid the mistake of trying to manage people, because this can quickly turn to micromanaging, which negatively affects employee engagement and morale. There is a time and a place to use each skill set.
2. **Trust**
   Trust is a feeling that is earned more often in small, frequent gestures rather than rare events of grandeur. Trust is incredibly important, difficult to create, and also easily destroyed. Leading and managing with consistency (i.e., how you respond to bad news) helps create an environment where people feel safe to work. This is an easy method to help build trust.
3. **Emotional support**
   Organizations often focus on providing physical resources to help employees succeed. But, emotional support is also a key ingredient in creating employee growth and job satisfaction. The inability to provide emotional support to your team is to

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> 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.

wonder why a tree with plenty of sun, but no rain, will wither. Avoid the temptation to reward top performers who are only effective at managing processes, but are ineffective at developing relationships, consensus building, and easily alienate or intimidate their peers and subordinates into submission.

4. **Encouragement**
   People are amazing and will show you just that, if leaders are willing to spend the time helping them connect to their purpose. It's well known that incredibly important learning can occur even after a colossal failure. It's also well known that bosses can screw up too. Create low-risk spaces for employees to think of new ideas and explore risk. Reward innovation and use this space to encourage risk-taking and define what acceptable failure looks like.

5. **Give and take**
   Most leaders focus on hierarchy as a means to identify who works for them. Hierarchy establishes an organization's level of accountability, responsibility, role, and consequence. However, these four items start to take on healthier connotations when leaders approach their hierarchy as the identification of which direct reports they are responsible for serving, not just supervising. In other words, these four things flow both ways throughout the hierarchy—not just down.

6. **Influence and collaboration**
   People smart applies to following and not just leading. The Center for Creative Leadership estimates that "75% of careers are derailed for reasons related to emotional competencies, including the inability to handle interpersonal problems, unsatisfactory team leadership during times of difficulty or conflict, or the inability to adapt to change or elicit trust."[5]

Working for a bad boss is one of the toughest challenges you'll face at work. Because it is frustrating, it often becomes increasingly more difficult to hide your dissatisfaction, including when you come home to your family. If this is your current struggle at work, look for non-traditional avenues to provide influence and change in your organization, such as collaborating with employees in other parts of the company, and finding ways to spend more time with your direct reports for their development (and yours!).

Developing soft skills

Almost six years ago, I realized that I wasn't people smart. I was passed over for a promotion, and when I finally bumped into someone on the interview panel, I came to learn why. I was surprised by his use of the words arrogant, selfish, and immature when describing my answers to the interview questions. No one on the panel questioned my technical ability or management skills. But overwhelmingly, they didn't trust my ability to connect with the people I would be leading.

At the time I didn't completely buy into his opinion. However, after I took several leadership assessments, such as Myers-Briggs and DISC, a pattern quickly emerged concurring with his view. It was then that I made a conscious decision to focus on developing my soft skills. The result has been an incredible turnaround of a reputation that had me headed nowhere in my organization and the creation of deeper, much more professional and personal relationships. So, the only remaining question is: Are you a boss people are excited to see when you show up or when you leave? ◙

1. Kristi Hedges: "If You Think Leadership Development Is A Waste Of Time You May Be Right" *Forbes-Opinion*, September 23, 2014. Available at https://bit.ly/2yIYKZG
2. Patrick Lencioni: *The Ideal Team Player: How to recognize and cultivate the three essential virtues*. Jossey-Bass: New Jersey, September 2016.
3. Christine Porath and Christine Pearson: "The Price of Incivility" *Harvard Business Review*, January/February 2013. Available at https://bit.ly/1cHYX1K
4. Dan Cable: "How Humble Leadership Really Works" *Harvard Business Review*, April 23, 2018. Available at https://bit.ly/2qTdtNC
5. P.G. Aquinas: *Organizational Revitalization and Emotional Intelligence*. Excel Books: New Delhi, 2008.