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Ten critical strategies for leadership success

Les Dakens and Judy Johnson, Ph.D., Financial Post
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The majority of an organization's spirit, feel, and attitude stems from its leaders' behaviours.

We all face the same dilemma -- how to fight fires and attend to business demands, while keeping an eye on the horizon to position our organizations for future success.

From working closely with top corporate leaders over the years, we have compiled our own Top 10 list of the most critical strategies that are proven to work for successful leadership. The best part is that these are actions any leader can take -- in any company, of any size, in any industry.

1. Manage your culture. The behaviour of every employee, from the front line to the executive suite, is what makes a company successful. Employees' behaviour (what they say or do) is influenced by their direct manager at every level. Managers set standards, communicate, measure, and create consequences for people every day. The collective behaviour determines the workplace culture and performance. The majority of an organization's spirit, feel, and attitude stems from its leaders' behaviours.

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2. Measure what you value. Do your employees know exactly what your company values? Most employees will do their jobs proudly and well when they know what their company values are. They may become confused if there are too many priorities, or if priorities conflict or are stated vaguely. Clearly define and state no more than five or six values. Then measure employees' performance against each one.

3. Challenge and disagree -- but then make the decision. Tap into everyone's ideas, and let them have their say -- this stimulates debate, fosters ideas, leads to better decisions, and generates buy-in. Challenge and disagree, but then make the decision and stand behind it and those who helped make it.

4. Focus on what you directly observe. If an employee is not performing, consider only what you actually see and hear in the workplace. It's tempting to ponder the employee's personal life or listen to hearsay, but most often, this is misleading.

5. "Would you do it if your life depended on it?" If someone is underperforming, ask, "Would they perform better if their life depended on it?" If they would, then the problem is poor motivation. Motivation is driven by consequences -- what happens as a result of behaviour. To encourage an employee to improve, manage the consequences to support their performance.

6. Transition from good performers to great performers. The difference between a good team and a great team is in a leader's ability to motivate -- to apply positive consequences. The best ways are through engagement, commitment, and the resulting pride of team members.

7. Deal quickly with poor performers. Some supervisors avoid conflict and won't deal with poor performers, leading to an eventual blowup and a lose-lose situation for everyone. By acting early, you can guide most people back on track through coaching and feedback.

8. Get face to face. Talking one on one, face to face, is the most effective way to influence someone. Receiving positive feedback from a supervisor in person is highly motivating. The best way for leaders to thank employees for their hard work is not money -- it's a simple handshake and a smile. The same is true when confronting poor performance. When you are face to face, the employee can't avoid the issue.

9. Balance your consequences. Consequences for behaviour can be positive, constructive, or missing altogether. Each consequence has its own effect on people. To build a positive relationship over time, provide a balance of consequences. A good rule of thumb is to provide four positive consequences (like praise) for each constructive consequence. Providing no consequences makes your leadership role ineffective, and the employee will rely on other consequences in the environment to encourage or discourage behaviour. This takes you out of the equation and leaves performance to chance.

10. Manage the learning curve to lead better. Intelligent, aggressive employees may seem farther along than they are, but a green employee can make fatal mistakes -- literally. Don't place people in roles they're not ready for -- help them stretch, but prevent them from breaking. Once you assess an employee as skilled and confident, you can coach for even higher performance.

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These strategies will give you and your leaders the tools to keep an eye on the future of the business while fighting the day-to-day fires and creating an environment where employees feel engaged and valued . . . a win-win for all!

Financial Post

This article is adapted from Johnson and Dakens' recently published book, *SwitchPoints: Culture Change on the Fast Track to Business Success* (John Wiley & Sons, 2008). Visit www.switchpointsbook.com for more details.

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