Engaging Leadership

Understanding and Respecting the Shades of Gray

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Many times new leaders come into positions of leadership with an enthusiastic, clear-eyed vision on the actions that need to be taken and changes made from having seen issues from the perspective of being in the trenches and dealing with the details. They then struggle with disillusionment and frustration as they are now exposed to additional information which reveals that the situation is generally not as straightforward as it had appeared. The leaders realize that the “correct” solution they had constructed in their mind is no longer viable. Instead they are usually faced with complex, multi-faceted issues that require them to exercise a high level of discretionary judgment and situational leadership. This is particularly challenging when it involves personnel matters. I tend to term this as leading in the ‘shades of gray’ and in doing so am not referencing the recent E.L James publications but rather as an analogy to the challenges of black-and-white photography.

As any photographer who has worked with black-and-white film can tell you, very little in the world is actually pure white or pure black, but rather the world is made up of myriad shades in between, the contrast and balance of which makes up the whole of the picture. Sometimes, one can adjust the picture in the developing and printing process to highlight one area or draw attention away from another to enhance the overall image. This is also representative of the world of leadership, management, and administration, particularly as it involves individual employees and their support needs, performance, and organizational contributions. Very few people are perfectly defined by a single-dimensional model, absolute, or stereotype. Rather they are a composite of a wide range of different highly personal experiences and factors. Similarly, few employees are either flawlessly outstanding in everything they do or absolute disasters with no redeeming qualities or value to the organization. Just as their performance and contributions vary, so too will their needs for support, validation, and development. For some leaders, particularly those new to the role, it can be very difficult to define and respond to these stylistic differences and demands.

Most individuals who aspire to leadership roles, or who get called upon to lead, tend to be self-motivated, high achievers. They are dedicated to an idea or vision and tend to work hard to achieve their professional and/or personal goals. Additionally, they tend to be individuals that look to the future and one will often hear them say they pursued leadership opportunities with a desire to make a positive difference for other employees or in the future of the organization. They have focused on specific accomplishments and make deliberate choices toward being successful based on their value systems and work styles. But the very traits that led to their success and identified them as having leadership potential can serve to undermine them once they have taken on a leadership role. At that point, it is no longer all about them and what they can personally achieve but about what is accomplished by those that they lead. This can be a difficult transition, particularly when they are faced with leading changes involving individuals who have a significantly different value system, perceived work ethic, or style for accomplishing goals. In this situation, leaders must quickly develop and draw on new skillsets that are focused more on active listening, adapting expectations, and understanding others to motivate them toward achieving positive performance results within the organizational framework. Alternately, they may be faced with addressing underperforming employees per the institutionally defined processes, which is rarely a fast, simple, or comfortable process.

We all see the world around us through a lens and filtered by our own experiences and this serves to draw attention to particular traits or aspects of someone else's performance. Undoubtedly, you have worked on a team or in a department where you felt some individuals were more engaged and effective contributors than others. Similarly, you may have wondered why the manager or organization does not "do something" about the semi-disengaged, obviously underperforming individual or why someone seems to always get away with behaving badly. In contrast, you may have friends or peers who are not being as valued or respected as you think they should be given your perspective of their contributions. Obviously, you are likely seeing these individuals through a particular lens or filter that is different from that of managers and administrators. But part of the responsibility of taking on a leadership role is to explore changing one's lens to see from the organizational perspective while still working to understand and respond to individual staff member needs.

It is not uncommon for new leaders or managers who have been in a role a few months to come to their administrators wanting to know how to get rid of someone who they perceive as not pulling their weight or contributing effectively to the health of the team. From their newcomer perspective, leaders and managers are decision-makers who have "power" or "authority" over individuals. They are often dismayed at learning of the extensive documentation and review processes required to actually take disciplinary actions and protect the library from a lawsuit. The situation is made particularly challenging when there is prior documentation that fails to support or even contradicts these performance concerns. Additionally, most libraries do not function in a vacuum but are part of a larger academic, civic, or corporate model, which often adds additional layers of procedural rules. This can be particularly complicated in organizations with unionized representation or where librarians hold faculty status with tenure. The reality is that few employees actually perform on a daily basis at a level that clearly supports termination. Due to the increase in legal challenges, many organizations have adopted conservative policies that will look to modify workload, and actually shift tasks or expectations before approving an actual dismissal. Exceptions to this tend to involve performance problems that could put people and property at risk, where one has escalating hostile conduct, or when there is effectively job abandonment through severe attendance deficiencies that are clearly documented and not legally protected through the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) or some other policy.

Coming back to our photography comparison, few performance evaluation instruments are based on a simple, single-category pass/fail rating. Instead, most have some type of scale or range of performance between excellence and unsatisfactory with multiple categories to assess different aspects of performance, thereby requiring one to put together a picture with those different shades of gray. Even though the business leadership gurus repeatedly assert that mediocrity, average, or good are the enemy of greatness, in truth every leader faces the challenge that for a variety of reasons many employees are in fact good or very good but not great as we often try to idealistically define it. In some cases this may be for reasons of intellectual ability, but more likely it is a due to how individuals perceive the organization and their work in the greater scheme of their lives, something that may difficult for dedicated leaders to grasp. For some employees, the library is a clean and pleasant place to work with books and generally nice people in order to earn a paycheck that pays the bills. They do not invest in the strategic future of the library but are immersed in the concept of their job responsibilities. That is not to say they do not take pride in their work or do their job well. In truth they may be dependable, consistent, accurate, and conscientious employees, but it is not a career for them and their interest in development or strategic big picture opportunities may be minimal. Instead, their personal priority system will always put something else as more important, such as family or a hobby or leisure activity. Other employees may be investing more in the career model and want to be offered development opportunities or engage in the 'strategic' discussions. Knowing who is in which groups will help one engage effectively with employees.

The key to learning about employee goals is to ask them and then listen in an attentive, open-minded, and non-judgmental manner. This will help one to understand how employees feel about their role in the organization, what they want from their future, and how they define success. Through this exercise, which may actually take multiple conversations if employees have never really thought about it, leaders may be surprised at what they learn about how employees view and their role and future in context of the organization. In addition to providing new general insights in employee motivation, leaders will have the opportunity to identify employees who are interested in growth and development but did not know how to bring it to a manager's attention or achieve it and recognize new talents. It is important that one not act in a parental role by expressing disappointment or lecture about wasted potential, when faced with an employee who is not interested in workplace based personal development, leadership opportunities, or engaging at a strategic level. Similarly, one must not use the information to put employees in a box, but rather to understand why the employees may make the choices they do. At all times, one must remember that employees are adults and making choices for reasons that are important to them. I still recall an administrator once taking me out to lunch and telling me that the organizational leadership had discussed my future and they had "decided" that I should develop toward becoming the Director of a mid-sized academic library. This was done without anyone ever asking me what my goals were, what motivated me, or really considering my strengths and limitations. In truth, my goal never has been and will never be to land the top leadership role in any library. My passion is detail-level operations and my aspiration is to be the second or third position (depending on the structure of the leadership team) in the library with a focus on day-to-day crisis management, engaging on projects, such as remodeling/facility initiatives or reinventing processes and workflows, and operational oversight. Not only does the public side of the top leadership role with promotional and fundraising responsibilities and extensive networking and travel not appeal to me, it does not play to my strengths and would be an example of the Peter Principle in action. Once I had laid my perspectives out for the administrator and my reasons for framing it as I did, she agreed that I did seem to know better than they where I could be most effective and successful.

So once leaders understand individual employees, they are next challenged to build a collage of images to fill the operational and strategic needs of the unit in the best way possible and this requires the ability to look at situational needs and engage with employees with a willingness to be flexible. As one example, suppose you have four employees who are responsible for covering a service desk and you know one has difficulties getting to work on time and another has regular issues with needing to leave early for child care issues and a third finds it difficult to sit for more than 90 minutes at a time. You could simply say everyone must work 8am to 5pm with a one-hour lunch break and then set an arbitrary or rotating desk schedule intended to treat everyone "equal" and thereby also create a scenario that almost guarantees persistent performance headaches with the employees. Instead, engage with the employees as to who might prefer to more regularly take the early or late hours. Then progress to ask further about shift preferences, number of sequential hours, staggering lunch breaks, etc. Let them help define what is fair and equitable, and if they do not mind a slight imbalance then so be it. Minor imbalances and trade-offs often will work themselves out with peer engagement, such as an employee that works a few less hours on a regular schedule is usually in a better position to pick of the inevitable emergency coverage times when someone is sick or has an urgent conflict. What will come out of this discussion is an opportunity to be responsive to an employee's needs without it being seen as preferential treatment because everyone will see and buy-in on the trade-offs. For example, one employee may prefer to leave at 4pm to pick up children from school but is perfectly content to regularly take the early shift. Or another employee might be a night owl and not a morning person and is perfectly happy to regularly take the late afternoons instead of the first desk hour of the day. Similarly, some employees may prefer to work in blocks and others take fill in slots here and there. In addition to letting employees feel that their needs matter, it also helps build a sense of ownership and commitment, which can help to lead someone to be a better employee.

Along with considering situational needs, one will need to have a sense of what is too much flexibility and when an employee may appear to be taking advantage of the generosity of others or the system. In this situation, the leader will need to gently bring it to the employees' attention before it becomes a serious problem of abuse or entitlement. For example, it is quite reasonable to let a new employee do some flextime or a shifted schedule for a major family event like a wedding when they have not had the opportunity to accrue sufficient leave time. However, by the third or fourth flextime or schedule adjustment request, noticing that the employee appears to use his or her accrued leave allocation as soon as it is available, it is time to have the discussion with the employee about planning ahead and working to collect and save accrued leave for forthcoming needs. While most leaders may feel fairly comfortable with the occasional exception, they may be taken aback by some situations that will legitimately warrant additional flexibility over an extended period of time. They would include issues such as an illness with an extended follow-up treatment schedule, such as cancer, or the birth of a child and the first couple of years while the child's immune system is still developing, particularly if another parent or caregiver is not available to deal with doctor's appointments or calls from daycare providers. These types of situations are more difficult because they will be noticed more by the employee's peers but may involve medical privacy and cannot be discussed. In which case, one just has to accept that one has joined the ranks of "misunderstood managers." This said, one drawback of engaging with employees on work/life balance issues and discussing with them how they view their work role that less experienced managers have to guard against is that one can get too close to the employee and start letting sympathy get in the way of accountability. Then one has lost the necessary neutrality to be an effective leader and trying to refocus back to the position responsibilities and organizational needs may result in dramatic and emotional conflict. So it is a constant experiment to find just the right touch or shading to apply to a particular situation with an element of trial and error and learning from one's mistakes.

I had previously mentioned how difficult it is in most organizations to actually terminate an employee based on performance. It is important though to be thoughtful in how much of one's own resources one allows an employee to dominate and understand to what degree one can engage and when to let it go. This requires accepting for some employees that the best one may hope for with a particular individual is routine mediocrity. In other words, quit beating your head against the wall that you can neither get every employee to actively engage and develop nor find a way to get rid of them. Instead look to identify those routine tasks that are suited to what the individual can and will do in a competent manner. But when taking into account resource needs for new initiatives, one should not overestimate the leadership and contributions of the mediocre employee. That said, with the rate that libraries are changing always leave the door open for employees to discover something new inside them that resonates with a new organizational initiative or opportunity because people can change...if they want to.

Finally, it is important to keep one thing in mind about the high achievers. Even as they may be committed, focused and enthusiastic, at times they can need your support more than the unmotivated employees and may be as equally difficult to engage with. For these employees, one may have the responsibility to keep them from overcommitting resources to support an idea, either theirs or someone else's. Some employees may be excellent in some areas of performance or for a period of time but constantly sustaining it in all areas is unrealistic. In truth, having perfectionist tendencies that require one to sustain "excellence" long term in all areas can take a serious toll on one's physical, mental, and emotional health. So one may also need to be available to help pick up the pieces as the employee may have failed in a blaze of glory and needs encouragement to get past the error in judgment and embarrassment. Or just be there to encourage when the individual is confronted with being human and not perfect.

CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this column was to encourage leaders to realize that there is not a nice formula book for how to be an effective leader because one is dealing with the human element which can be highly emotional, variable, and unpredictable. To address this one needs to reach out to employees to understand their goals and viewpoints and then exercise situational leadership. This means one needs to create a unique picture of the individual's skills, strengths, and limitations. Then set this picture in the larger frame of the organization's needs and understand where one can work to develop the image to enhance particular elements. Finally, one must recognize that even when the picture does not have any highlights or shadows, but is mostly mid-tones, the employee can still be a valuable contributor. Similarly, one should work to balance the picture to healthy perspective. This means being prepared to step in and take appropriate action when employees seem reach the extremes of perfectionistic, over performing or consistently destructive in a truly damaging way to themselves or the organization.

Author's Note: A word of thanks to my husband Joel Kitchens, who does black-and-white, large format photography, for the education in this medium that helped me build the analogy.

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