

Leadership in Focus: Connecting Vision and People

by David Sarju

If everything is important, then nothing is.

Leadership in Focus

Every organization provides its leaders with more tasks and distractions than anyone can handle. The solution to this challenge is to focus on those principles that will have the greatest impact on individual, team and enterprise performance. You'll find that many tactics tie to your priorities. I suggest two – vision and people. Clarity of vision and clarity about the people you lead.

Your vision is the future you are creating peppered with strategies and measurable goals. On the people side, each person brings a unique complement of talents, needs, hopes, values and insights. At any level of leadership, your job is to keep in focus what matters most to the team and to individuals, then connect the two.

Make the Vision Palpable

Helping employees connect with the team/organization's vision is essential. Without a future-directed orientation, everything becomes hum-drum repetition. A vision can be synonymous with a hope for a better world – a hope that your enterprise serves a specific need for a better world. Extend the vision outward. For example, be clear how your service or product will enhance life on the planet. The more often and different ways you can relate this message, the more individuals will feel it. Expressing this future in a way that excites employees will capture their imagination. They won't need to memorize it. Restating the message also helps you and others test and refine it, enhancing accountability.

Learn What Matters to Individuals

Many tools are available to help you connect with what is alive in the people you lead. But your intent matters more. All the clarifying questions or paraphrasing statements in the world won't help me connect with an employee who I disdain. I'm just going through the motions. Like a teacher skilled in pedagogical techniques but exasperated with a student's behavior, unable to connect with the student, the teacher's toolbox is of little value when the student feels no connection ("unloved"). So check your intent first. If your number one interest is to hear what matters most to the employee and attend to her happiness and success, you'll find a way. This is a timing issue that requires you temporarily set aside what matters most to you - not easy. You must suspend our well-conditioned "either/or" thinking. Alternatively, focusing first on the performance that the employee must correct to meet the team's needs, often interferes with your ability to hear the employee's needs. Once you have helped the employee identify what matters most to her, you can then re-focus on what matters most to you and the team.

You are the Connector

Key to individual and team performance is an employee's ability to connect what matters to her with the vision: what matters to the team/organization. You as leader are the connector: on one hand, making palpable what is most important to the organization; on the other hand, ensuring that individuals are wholly appreciated and utilized. When both occur, individuals bring their best and collectively engage in healthy conflict that enhances team ideas, processes and outputs. As leader, you ensure the symbiotic relationship: both the individual and the team are enhanced by the relationship. Say you have a skilled and introverted analytical contributor among your customer service team. Your job is not to pull the introvert out of her shell. Instead, as long as she is excited about the team's vision and possesses valuable skills, I suggest that you explore roles that allow her thrive behind the scenes, in ways that improve team performance. Nothing inspires a player to greater performance like team success coupled with appreciation for her unique contributions. With your vision clear to all, and each employee contributing to that vision, distractions diminish, and everyone remains engaged and productive.

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