Techniques for Providing Strong Leadership

David E. Hartl

Many are finding that staff must provide effective leadership for others who are not within the authority structure of their particular organization. The others may be people from other departments, vendors, suppliers, agents, or in other roles important to the organization's business success but outside the organization's authority and accountability structure. Even though it's possible to discontinue working with people from other departments or cease contracting with vendors that don't perform, doing so is often more expensive and troublesome than providing effective leadership that can assure success. Such leadership must be strong, focused, and persistent. It is based on clarity of purpose and support for actions. Accountability for results is based on mutual agreement for results rather than on coercion for failure.

The business case is simple for leadership based on clarity of purpose and support for actions rather than authority-centered directing of behavior: when leaders use coercion they can expect followers to comply, conform, and obey, but that is all. Followers have the power, under the right conditions, to go far beyond compliance and give respect, initiative, creativity, and commitment. To elicit the full potential from followers, leaders need to use techniques different from coercion. Here are ten techniques for providing strong leadership for others with whom you must achieve results and do not wish to use the power of coercion to get them.

1. CLARIFY PURPOSE AND DESIRED RESULTS

Become crystal clear in your own mind about what you are trying to accomplish through a business relationship with others. Write it out for yourself. Refine what you wrote until it is absolutely clear to you. Now develop a detailed picture in your mind of what the situation will look and feel like when the purpose has been completely fulfilled. Write that out in brief form. Try describing it to someone else and ask them to tell you what they think you said. If what they tell you is exactly what you want, then you're ready for the next technique.

2. COMMUNICATE WITH OTHERS

Help the other(s) understand clearly what the purpose of your business relationship is, what goals you are working toward, and what desired results you want. Vividly describe your vision of what the situation will look like when the results have been fully achieved. Give people a detailed image to relate to. Help them to see their individual roles in achieving the results. Be sure to secure their active agreement (not just passive acquiescence) to pursue the results you want (alignment with goals) before enabling them to use their power and give them the organization's authority to fulfill their responsibilities (empowerment).

3. CHART THE COURSE

Engage the others in defining the major strategies and tactics that will be used to achieve the desired results. Solicit input from all involved to assure that all possible options for action are fairly considered. Develop a course of action that will take maximum advantage of the full capacities of all involved. Develop charts of the work schedule (GANTT charts, critical path charts, work flow charts, time-lines, checklists, etc.) to help guide work activities and assure accountability for timely actions and results.

4. COORDINATE

Identify and develop linkages with others that are needed to support the work of the people involved. Show how each individual's work affects the work of others and of the whole organization. Identify benchmarks to assess progress. Use a consensus decision process whenever possible to agree on plans and approaches that must be effectively implemented by others to assure their accurate understanding and genuine commitment to producing results. (See "Techniques for Consensus Decision Making" by D. E. Hartl elsewhere on this website.)

5. COOPERATE

Recognize that most people want to succeed for themselves even if that means others must lose. Competition is the "default" or automatic behavior style of most people. This learned bias must be overcome by a leader's strong emphasis on cooperation and agreement if results are to be successfully achieved without coercion. Leaders need to

foster an attitude of mutual helpfulness by setting cooperation as a standard for behavior and recognizing/rewarding others for helping out when needed on their own initiative. Leaders must regard unit boundaries as easily crossed and expect others to provide necessary help when required to produce results. Leaders must insist that everyone recognizes and accepts a total system perspective even while focusing on their own individual tasks. Leaders need to help each person involved to see how their individual actions affect the total system both "up stream" and "down stream."

6. CONNECT

Allocate time and resources to help others understand the "big picture" of the business, their roles in achieving success, and that they are cared about beyond their ordinary work functions. Support developing interpersonal relationships of mutual respect and trust with others who are key to the overall success of the business. Leaders need to share appropriate personal information about themselves and be interested in others as people, not just as business objects. Be interested in more than just the ordinary "name, rank, and function." Enjoy each others' company, have fun together, work together happily, and celebrate the achievement of results with enthusiasm.

7. COACH AND FACILITATE

At all times maintain a sharp focus on the purposes, goals, and results that the organization is pursuing. Set high standards that call for those involved to stretch themselves on behalf of optimum performance. Help to define clear performance expectations and responsibilities of each individual. Manage problem-solving and decision-making processes that actively engage all those involved. Offer training and support for perfect practice in order to achieve expectations. Regard honest mistakes as learning opportunities. Provide the tools and resources necessary for people to be effective. Provide information that is essential for their success and be open to their sharing ideas for improvements. Offer highly targeted individual coaching when necessary. Expect to lead by example in all you do.

8. CANDOR

Tell the truth. Communicate information freely and in a timely manner. Cooperation requires maximum information. Encourage and listen to each person's candid feedback and accept it as influential when appropriate. Treat tension and conflict as allies to creativity, innovation, and balance. Accommodate genuine differences of perspective prior to decision. Once decisions are made, hold everyone strictly accountable to uphold all agreements about both the results the organization is pursuing and the communication and other work processes that are used to achieve them.

9. CORRECT DEFICIENCIES QUICKLY

Creatively confront deficiencies of individuals that cannot be effectively handled within the cooperative framework. Quickly step up to individual performance problems before they become morale problems. Respect the sensibilities of individuals when confronting them (e.g. criticize in private; praise in public) while also respecting the needs of others to get the best performance and reliability from everyone.

10. CREATE COMMITMENT

Create continuing commitment to producing results through full participation and enabling genuine ownership of purposes, goals, strategies, and tactics. Maintain a high level of leadership credibility – assure that people keep believing in each other's and the leader's integrity and everyone's desire to achieve the organization's purposes. Encourage the use of authority to authorize action and support individual responsibility rather than as an attempt to control others. Recognize that you can only earn and engender commitment from others; you cannot demand or coerce it. It is individual commitment that produces extraordinary results.

Even as these ten techniques are adopted in principle by different leaders, the way the techniques are implemented will vary according to the natural human differences that leaders have. There is plenty of room for variation in personal style and individuality in effective leadership. This acknowledgment also serves as a reminder that the real strength of leadership is the personal example of the leader.