A Leadership Action Anyone Can Do, and Everyone Should

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The one skill every change agent needs most, and is trained in least, is interpersonal leadership. Here is a very simple leadership action that every change agent needs to practice. In fact, anyone and everyone should adopt the habit.

Every day we need, ask, and expect our working peers, leaders, and reporting personnel to do things with us and for us. It's part of being a team. And while we have an expansive menu of process and business improvement practices to choose from, simply ensuring that our coworkers and we do our work right the first time, and on time, can make the greatest improvement in the office environment.

When it comes to driving change, we set expectations and re-write processes to drive a different way of doing things. This too requires teamwork and follow-through. There is one simple leadership action that I find is my best tool for driving change in practice and behavior. It works as a leader driving new methods, and it works as a peer holding my coworkers accountable for their part of any bargain.

Proactively set expectations, and then follow through.

I know it sounds ridiculously simple, but failure to do that one thing often leads to most failures of responsibility or misunderstandings of what "done" looks like and, therefore, office or "transactional" process failures. What's more, we don't have to have leadership titles to exercise the above leadership principle.

Here is a real example that I ran into this week. It's so common in virtually any context that I believe the reader will feel like he or she has lived this story before.

A quality leader is reviewing a test report before inking her signature to the document that will follow the product for its production and service life. The proof of passing tests is essential to the product's sell-ability as well as the customer's product and service quality. The quality leader's signature should be a formality; an assurance that processes were followed and that everyone did his or her part. It should not be a place where defects are detected.

The lead engineer for the project under which the team develops the product is truly responsible for the product's performance. The lead engineer must know what the test report details and make the determination that the test results prove a quality performance.

Because the quality engineer should not need to do anything with the report other than provide the quality assurance, her time in the schedule to review and approve the report and make it official is two days, more than enough time to read and sign the document. Any work to be done on the document must already be complete and correct before it lands in her inbox.

Because I'm telling an example, you already know that this isn't going end with things going according to plan.

She starts flipping through the document to make sure that all of the components are included and notices immediately that things are not correct. Some of the pictures in the document are of a product that is not only the wrong one, but it's not even one of her company's products. Also, several of the tests that were supposed to be conducted have not been done, or at least there isn't any information included. She doesn't need to read any further to know that she won't be approving the test report.

Now, does this sound familiar, even in a slightly different context maybe? This kind of thing happens all the time to everyone in a position of signature authority or certification. The work to follow the process or provide the proof of compliance isn't complete.

Sometimes people assume that the work of others is right and pass it on without checking. Sometimes people decide to let the next step of the process, especially official inspection steps, catch a mistake instead of looking for defects before passing work on. Sometimes people hope that the one with inspection and approval authority will catch and correct the defects. Those assumptions and wishful-thinking activities are the ones we absolutely must stop.

We don't have to be a signature authority to put a stop to this stuff either; we can be anyone in the process. All we need to do is reject anything that comes across our workspace that isn't entering in the proper state. We can give ourselves the authority to do this by proactively setting expectations.

Let me share the rest of the story that details how this quality leader handled the problem. In my opinion, she did everything correctly. I will also say, that though she

has no direct reports, her peers and her leaders obviously respect her, and many look to her for guidance. She is a leader in her organization without any leadership title because of actions like the ones I will describe.

Upon recognizing that the test report was faulty in several respects she picked up the phone and called the project manager responsible for the schedule. “The test report won’t be complete and approved on time,” she explained. The corrections couldn’t be done in a day. Can she stay late and get them done? No, she wasn’t going to make the corrections, the lead engineer was. She would instruct him if he needed it.

Her next visit was with the lead engineer to return to him the defective test report. She brought with her a copy of the e-mail correspondence between them that accompanied the report when it was delivered to her. That correspondence helped her put a quick end to any arguments over who was responsible for correcting the report or who was responsible for missing the scheduled due date.

The quality leader has provided training to the engineering group, several times to keep it fresh, to explain the responsibilities and requirements for the test plans, test data, and test reports. She is the expert on the industry requirements and how to interpret them, but the design engineers are the experts on the product and are by definition in the process, responsible for product performance.

When the test report of our tale was e-mailed to her, she responded to the lead engineer, “You have reviewed the report and everything is correct?” She gave him a reminder of what she expected and what the process dictated, and his responsibility. He responded with an affirmative.

So, though she has no reporting authority over the lead engineer, she and he both have given her the authority to tell him that he is going to fix the mistakes and take responsibility for the missed due date. This is because she set an expectation and he agreed to it.

She did not enable the lead engineer to make his mistake her last-minute emergency. Likewise, she did not let his mistake turn into her responsibility to the schedule that could not be satisfied. His mistake remains his pain to correct and, therefore, he will hopefully be more diligent next time about ensuring that when he delivers the test report it is correct and not defective.

If he is overwhelmed and needs help with a test report in the future, she can help him, but not at the last minute on a timeframe set for a simple read-and-sign activity. Do you see how proactively setting and then reinforcing expectations drives fewer defects in people-centric processes? (The same principle applies to machine-based processes when you consider it.)

We, at every level of authority, from none to the chief executive, can practice the same leadership principle. Often it is easier than we think because some process either implies or expressly dictates some expectations about the inputs to our process steps as well as our own outputs.

As change agents, this practice is essential. We will fail in driving change if we cannot establish what the new way of doing things is and hold everyone involved accountable. The expectations empower us to hold others accountable.

The key to this is the agreement. When we set expectations we must receive acknowledgement of them. That acknowledgement is our authority to reject anything that does not pass muster. By rejecting the defective, we further empower ourselves to do it again. The minute we accept a defect, we open the door for more.

I believe that this leadership action and principle is the key to solving so many of our behavioral, cultural, and process challenges. It is the key to making everyone care about safety or quality. It is the key to process discipline. It is the key to successful teamwork.

The best part is, we don't have to be managers or executives to execute it or to influence others. The quality leader in my story has no direct reports, yet she undoubtedly influenced at least two other people with her actions, and probably more.

Make this action and principle a habit for yourself. Share it with your coworkers. Teach it to your personnel. The more people we empower with this simple practice, the better our processes work, the more efficient and effective our teams become, and the stronger our business gets.

Set expectations proactively. Empower yourself to reject an unacceptable input by getting acknowledgement of those expectations up front. Then stand by those expectations and reject inputs that don't meet them. Empower your entire organization to do the same and see how many of your "process" problems end up solving themselves.

Stay wise, friends.

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