

Ignite Newsletter September 2007(b)

Great Frontline Leader

An annual survey conducted by The Ken Blanchard Companies for the past three years with hundreds of companies has consistently identified that “developing potential leaders” is the number one critical need in today’s organizations. Why?

A research report published by Rainmaker Thinking, Inc.®, may shed some light. Their findings? “The day-to-day communication between supervisor managers and direct reports has more impact than any other single factor on employee productivity, quality, morale, and retention.”*

When people recall and share a time when they were the most engaged in and excited about their own work, their responses cluster into predictable categories feeling the work was important, feeling appreciated, learning and growing, being part of a great team, and having autonomy—all aspects of work that managers can directly influence!

Look at your own organization and analyze the situation. What work teams are the happiest and most productive in your company? Is there a correlation between these high performing groups and the quality of the person leading them? If your company is like others that The Ken Blanchard Companies® has worked with, chances are you will find that the best teams are being led by the best managers.

In working with large and small organizations for over 25 years we have learned that it is the relationship a supervisor or manager has with his or her direct reports that best determines employee morale and satisfaction. That’s why successful organizations know that improving leadership capabilities within their organizations is the best way to improve employee morale, satisfaction, and productivity.

What Makes a Great Frontline Leader?

While there are many aspects of being a great frontline leader, there are three main skills that all supervisors and managers need to master in order to succeed: partnering skills, performance management skills, and interpersonal skills.

Partnering skills are the frontline leader’s ability to accurately diagnose the individual competence and motivation levels of his or her direct reports, and then use the appropriate leadership style for the situation.

Is the direct report an eager beginner with the task? An overwhelmed employee with moderate skills for the task? Or an experienced veteran who has routinely handled this task successfully in the past? Each of these employees requires a different management style.

When first beginning a new task where they have had little, if any, prior knowledge or experience, most individuals should be led by a Directing style. They need to know what to expect and how to do the task at hand.

As the development level of an employee increases, his or her competence and commitment fluctuate. People at this stage need a Coaching style—high direction—to continue to build skills—as well as high support to address their low commitment.

Situational Leadership®II

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As competence continues to improve, most individuals go through a self-doubt state where they question whether they can perform the task on their own. These individuals need a Supporting style—they need to be listened to and encouraged but do not need much direction, since they have demonstrated competence for doing the task.

Finally, in the highest level of development, employees demonstrate high levels of competence and commitment. The corresponding leadership style to use is Delegating—giving the employee increased autonomy for doing the job he or she has demonstrated both competence and commitment in doing.

The next set of skills that all frontline leaders need to master are **performance management skills**. These are the ability to set clear performance expectations, reward and recognize progress toward goals, and provide negative performance feedback when necessary.

The secret to helping an employee excel lies in the details; the best way to capture the details is to meet frequently and informally, while the specifics of a success or a disappointment are fresh in the memory. Great frontline leaders meet more frequently—and less formally—with the people they support. This makes the conversation vivid and the advice timely. Instead of saving performance discussions—and criticisms—for a formal annual review, the great frontline leader meets with each direct report bimonthly, weekly, or even daily to discuss performance, needs, and goals.

Interpersonal skills are the third set of skills that hold it all together. If partnering and performance management skills are what today's frontline leader needs in order to manage effectively, interpersonal skills are how he or she goes about doing it. It is the ability to communicate effectively, listen actively, and maintain each employee's self-esteem while getting the job done.

This type of communication includes three steps.

1. **Gather information.** Ask something like, "What are your thoughts on this? How do you feel about doing this?"
2. **Check for understanding.** Say something like, "So this would be something new for you. Sounds like you're excited about this opportunity."
3. **Ask for permission.** Ask something like, "Since you haven't had any experience with this kind of thing, would it be helpful if ...?"

Improving Satisfaction and Performance in Your Organization

A great frontline leader cannot be the command-and-control leader of the past. People are not interested in working for someone who just gives orders daily and conducts evaluations annually. Today's workers are looking for leaders who will coach them by listening actively and providing the direction or support needed to attain shared goals.

To "move the needle" in your organization, improve the quality of frontline leadership. That change will improve employee morale, satisfaction, and productivity. Providing your people with frontline leaders who possess great partnering, performance management, and interpersonal skills is one of the best ways to get things done in a way that is mutually satisfying to frontline workers, their supervisors, and the company as a whole.

*Generational Shift: What We Saw at The Workplace Revolution," Bruce Tulgan, September 2003

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