Leadership Development: 5 vital questions to effectively develop leaders

Posted on 02/03/2016, by:

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Employee morale and behavior, results and culture are all the responsibility of organizational leadership. After all, if the leaders aren't leading, we can't expect the followers to follow, or be motivated to do so. In your organization, is leadership development thought of as best solved with a workshop or training event, or treated and funded as a business-critical, strategic priority?

Successful organizations realize everything rises and falls under leadership responsibility. These same organizations realize leadership development is not an event; it is an evolving process complementing all facets of business operations. Finally, they have key indicator measurements that provide insight and directs their continuous leadership investment.

Teaching Supervisors to be Safety Coaches and Leadership Safety Coaching have both played a significant role in developing leader capabilities (from lead employee to senior executive) in client organizations for twenty years. The successful organizations mentioned above represent how client organizations have followed a methodical process to prioritize their leadership improvement efforts because they realize failed leadership development approaches almost always create barriers to future attempts.

Whether you are developing leaders to improve safety, quality, productivity, or discretionary effort, the process is the same. Begin with answering the following five questions.

1. If we profiled a great leader in our operations, what would we see them doing and saying, and what results would we experience? Too many organizations seek to develop leaders without beginning first to identify and profile what a great leader would look like behaviorally. As the late Stephen Covey suggested, "Begin with the end in mind." If you had excellent business results in all aspects of operations and a high-performing culture that sustains the results without stimulation, what would the average leader (level by level) be seen doing and saying that creates confidence?

2. What percent of leaders (level by level) would be placed in the category of change agents vs. managers of status quo and, more importantly, to whom does each leader report? Do you have the right people in the right positions with the right competencies? Do you have more change agents or accepters of status-quo? This includes reporting structure. If a new supervisor is eager to demonstrate her desire to be an effective change-agent, yet reports

up to a manager that is satisfied with status-quo, how long will this positive change attitude (or individual) last? This is why it is critical to not separate out a single level of leadership for development opportunities. People pay attention to what their boss pays attention to. If one level (i.e., supervisor) doesn't see the new leadership style or skills demonstrated by the level above, all improvement opportunity may be lost.

3. What do we want the intended audience to feel, know, and do as a result of this initiative, and how will we validate the impact? Emotions have an impact on behavioral choice and humans respond emotionally to new information before they respond logically. Is there an intended emotion that is being solicited? For knowledge, several organizations conduct pre- and post-tests to validate both the existing and transference of new knowledge. But there is more to leadership development than knowledge alone and it can be results-limiting to stop there. For example, if leaders already know what you want them to know, but the gap is in behavior, more knowledge isn't the answer. This is why all leadership development efforts must have a behavioral focus. If targeting safety leadership, what are the behavioral objectives? Are the desired behaviors of leaders to be focused on the prevention of injuries and incidents and strengthening the safety culture? Finally, what measurement systems will support your ability to measure what people feel, know, and do as a result of your training? This will be critical to demonstrate both return on investment and return on attention.

4. How will this effort contribute to business results? If leadership development solicits the desired emotional response, knowledge increases, and positive observable behavior increase, but the results do not change, it is common for support to wane and for barriers to future effort to be created. Results must be more than just lagging indicators. What increase in activities and performance would be experienced when the efforts are successful?

5. What systems, methodologies, and experiences would complement or hinder this effort? All leadership development efforts are only as effective as the reinforcement that follows. Current performance management (i.e., only annual reviews), measurements, systems, culture, and hiring and promotion processes are just a few influencers on leadership styles. Answering this question is a must to prevent surprises down the road. Most leadership development methodologies do not fail in theory, they fail in practice when not well thought out in advance of the first exercises.

Most effective executives, when discovering the need to improve leadership capabilities within their organization, demand a quick response because of the realized substantial potential in the investment. There can be a remarkable difference in doing things right versus right now. Rather than starting by seeking out the best program, workshop or training material, ensure there is alignment in the vision of excellence and the starting point of your leaders. Sometimes it's necessary to take a step back in order to leap forward. **LE**

This article was originally published in Occupational Health & Safety (December 2013).

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Categories :

Leadership

Tags : leadership development, effective leaders

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