ASSOCIATIVE LEADERS

By CONSTANCE M. SAVAGE

Human interaction. It's not only at the core of all business transactions but also the primary source of headaches for organizational leaders.

Why? In frank discussions behind closed doors, executives disclose a mixture of frustration and disbelief as they assess the impact of their interactions with staff members. Leaders are often chagrined when they give feedback, shape the organizational culture or set performance expectations because their attempts fall on seemingly deaf ears.

Whether it's because women have a short-term legacy of corporate leadership or the simple assumption that "we're all adults," organizational leaders often miss prime opportunities to improve business outcomes, promote professional development and create a distinctive leadership legacy.

Whatever the cause, many leaders have lost touch with their ability to say what they mean. But the ability to communicate clearly and make a difference can be rediscovered through the practices of associative leadership.

Assertive leaders utilize behaviors that maximize their ability to achieve business outcomes while developing the people with whom they work. Assertive behavior is direct, emotionally honest and keeps people in an interaction psychologically and emotionally intact. Assertive leaders distinguish themselves because they have mastered the ability to be self-reflective enough to know they are not perfect.

They have blind spots — aspects of their own behavior of which they are unaware. Blind spots may be as innocuous as the unconscious nervous drumming of fingers on a tabletop during meetings to a more serious behavior such as avoiding conflict at all cost. Assertive leaders assume that their direct reports have blind spots as well and could benefit from direct feedback.

Assertive leaders are more effective in shaping and changing the behavior of others because they:

- Don't mind-read. They clearly describe behavior and its consequences versus attributing motivation to others. For example, rather than labeling the behavior of a late-comer to meetings as disorganized, irresponsible or incompetent, an assertive leader addresses the behavior — not the motivation — by saying, in her best-modulated voice: "I've noticed that you've been late for three of the last four staff meetings. They start at 8 a.m. I expect you to be on time for the next meeting. Any questions?"
- Send the mail to the right address. Too often, executives are frustrated both with an associate's behavior and with their own failure as a boss to nip problem behavior in the bud. Leaders will often discuss person A's behavior with another executive. After this venting, the executive leaves the conversation believing at some level that the issue has been resolved.
- Unfortunately, person A wasn't privy to the discussion and is clueless about his boss' concerns.
- Assertive leaders direct their feedback and observations to the appropriate person — the person whose behavior needs to change.
- Seize the moment. Feedback is most effective when it is timely. Waiting two or three months to "build a case" simply allows employees 60 to 90 days to become really good at what drives their bosses crazy.

Assertive leaders provide on-the-spot feedback to praise and to reinforce on-target performance and to coach and improve off-target performance.

- "Read" their audiences. Assertive leaders are expert at targeting their responses and comments to produce maximum positive outcomes. They can discern when it is appropriate to offer a supportive comment, make a straightforward, factual observation or issue a directive as a method of getting results.
- Adhere to the principle of "ruthless incrementalism." Assertive leaders understand that they must leverage every opportunity to send consistent messages about what they expect from others in the workplace.

These leaders use patience, repetition and a step-by-step approach to consistently focus their energies to attain organizational goals, develop their human resources and create a work environment that embodies their vision and values.

Most importantly, assertive leaders know that people can and do learn new, more effective behavior because they are committed to their personal and professional development. These leaders skillfully combine an understanding of the human spirit, common sense and business savvy to create and maintain an organization that is both profitable and an enviable place to work.

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