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Focus: Leadership

The L in Supervisor

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Think about the supervisors you've worked for or have known. What did you think of them? What did people say about them? How did they get results? How did their employees get results? What set apart the effective supervisors from the ineffective ones?

Not all supervisors are leaders. Not all leaders are supervisors. But if you want to be an effective supervisor, you better concentrate on becoming a leader.

Off the top of your head, it may be somewhat difficult to differentiate between the two roles. Both are defined as being in charge of people and results. The difference is how those results are obtained from their employees. The difference is also the quality and value of those results.

A supervisor gives directives and exacts responsibility from the employees given those directives. A leader, on the other hand, paints a vision of the outcome and allows, with guidance as needed, the employees to utilize their own talents to create the directives that lead to the desired outcome. It is a harder road to travel, being a leader. It requires establishing trust and being a clear communicator. It requires a more "hands-off" approach, being more of a coach and guide. It requires establishing an atmosphere where mistakes are embraced as opportunities and dialogue is open and honest. And, ironically enough, it requires resolve and definition.

One role is not necessarily better than the other. There is a time for a supervisor: when talent is low and the outcome holds little room for error or creativity. But in most team environments the leader produces the better outcome, allowing people to explore their talents and express their personalities to become a more cohesive, dynamic unit and to produce more meaningful results.

There are numerous qualities that define effective leadership and there is a sea of training information and programs on the subject. But before you dive into that sea, make sure you are concentrating on the following:

VISION - Conceive what you want to achieve. Have a clear picture of the end result, not necessarily the details of how to get to it...your employees will help you with that.

LISTEN - Stop listening to the voices in your head and start listening to the voices in theirs. Your employees are the keys that will unlock your vision. Employees are much more interested in listening to themselves than listening to you. Provide the vision and listen to how they will achieve it. Listen with both ears AND both eyes.

RESPECT - Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: "Men are respectable only as they respect." I would argue that it applies to everyone, not just men. In order for employees to express their talents and creativity to full potential, you must acknowledge that they have talents and creativity and that

they are uniquely qualified to express them. In turn, as your vision comes alive, you will be respected. The leader recognizes that all are equal as people, we just play different roles.

RESPOND - If your employees need help, respond. If they need guidance, respond. If they have questions, respond. Respond doesn't mean solve or fix. Respond means to connect with what is going on; you are part of their struggle and their success... because they are part of yours. Never leave an employee hanging in a gap of silence; let them know you care by letting them know you are there.

RECOGNIZE - Recognition, like people, comes in all shapes and sizes. Raises are nice and so are bonuses, but they aren't always necessary. Employees want to know that YOU know what they are doing and how hard they are working. Tell them they are doing a good job. Give them a gift certificate. Have a volleyball game. Make them breakfast. Teach them how they can recognize each other. Find out their interests and the things they like and recognize them in ways they like to be recognized. Actively invest in and motivate the people that are making the vision come alive!

I like to phrase this set as "Being the eyes and ears of the 3Rs." Because not only do leaders have to establish their own visions and open up their own minds, they need to recognize the realization of that vision in others, and that comes through the respect, response, and the recognition that employees utilize amongst them.

Supervisors define their people. Leaders are defined by their people.

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