

FEATURES

One More Sermon on Synergy: Make Your Focus a Conscious Choice

by Paul Ludwick

As a public sector manager, you can decide whether you will be a leader or a director. It is a choice about whether you will focus your attention on the people to whom you report or the people with whom you work. Regrettably, there is a real conundrum here. If the focus of your attention is your work group, the workers will thrive, and the work group will succeed. The success of your work group, however, may not be a guarantee of your personal success and advancement in the organization.

If the focus of your attention is the governing body or your boss, your workers will get by, and the work group will muddle through. But the lack of success of your work group may not prevent you from advancing in the organization. The choice is yours.

Does a Positive Work Environment Matter?

Some managers approach the responsibility of leadership from the premise that a positive, supportive, yet challenging work environment under the leadership of an entrepreneurial, people-centered, and values-based manager is both functionally possible and more successful than the work environment under the rule of an autocratic director. Based on what actually happens in many workplaces in America, however, you might want to be strictly honest and ask, "Does a positive work environment really matter?"

If you are employed by the organization in question, you will probably think, "Of course it does. I do my best work in a positive environment. I am more productive. I serve clients better. I want to be at work. I spend less time complaining."

If you are a customer, you may think, "I don't care whether workers are happy or not. I just want them to do what I need for them to do."

And if you are a citizen of the community, you may think, "If the garbage is picked up and the police show up when I need them, I would just as soon the employees weren't too happy. We don't need to be paying so many of them anyway."

Actually, there is documented evidence that in service industries, including government, it does make a difference if the workers are happy in their work. Positive treatment of workers is reflected in a more positive experience for customers, which translates into higher levels of citizen satisfaction and higher numbers of return customers.

In my research on developing "trust loops" in work groups, a couple of questions have kept coming back to me. The most difficult has been this one: If the way employees are treated brings a positive result in the responses of citizens and customers, why do organizations more or less routinely alternate between visionary, entrepreneurial managers who create excitement and challenge and autocratic directors who take all the fun out of coming to work?

There appear to be real cycles in the management styles of people who lead organizations. Why is this? Why does a council with one of the most widely known, people-oriented managers in the country replace that manager with a known autocrat? On the other hand, why does the council in an adjacent community decide to hire a highly nurturing manager when a long-tenured administrator with a controlling work style retires?

Quest for Answers

In my search for responses to these questions, I talked to a number of leaders whom I admire. Two answers rose above the rest. The first answer was that the reason that management style appears to alternate from one manager to another is that people making hiring decisions about managers seldom think about management style during their searches.

And when they do think about it, a candidate's style of management is seldom as important to their decisions as are the candidate's experience with other matters that are high on the organizational agenda at the time.

Think about the last time you were involved in selecting a candidate for a supervisor's position. Did the person's management style weigh as heavily as his or her accounting background, sales record, or planning experience? Did you even ask about the record of success of the work group he or she managed? Actually, the most important skill set for organizational success is probably the one that receives the least consideration in the selection of a manager. Why is this?

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I was ending a long interview with a manager who had impressed me greatly, not just because he agreed with me about the importance of valuing the work group but also because of his background. He had had a long history of turning around call centers for a telephone company. He had been good at it. His task in each one of his assignments had been to "fix it or dismantle it."

In each case, his work-group orientation had been successful in turning around both the morale and the effectiveness of the group. This person understood the responsibility of a manager and obviously had all the necessary skills. He had validated everything I believed to be important about managing groups. I was pleased.

Then he volunteered, "You know, I have to tell you that I have a weakness." I answered, "Well, you were doing fine, and I hadn't asked, but go ahead and tell me."

He said, "I am just not very good at managing upward. I am better at managing the people who work for me than I am at managing the people I work for." At the time, I thought to myself, "Wow, that's odd. I'm not good at that, either." What I said to him was "Hmm. That's interesting."

However, he had given me the answer to one of the key questions of management and succession: If every person who has ever been asked in a job interview to describe the best supervisor they ever worked for lists the same set of traits, why are there still so many ineffective managers in the workplace?

The answer is that, as a rule, people who are better at managing upward do more of the things that get them noticed and promoted to increasingly responsible positions in organizations than do the managers who are better at managing the people who work for them.

It is a matter of focus. And people who attend most closely to you are easier for you to like. This may be the most basic response in all human relationships. We are all attracted to people who validate us by the quality of the attention they give us.

Managers in any organization have to focus their attention somewhere. There is choice here, and sometimes it rises to the level of personal ethics. The manager who focuses her attention on the work group is going to invest herself in its success more than does the manager who centers his attention on the person he reports to in the organization.

Please understand that, at this point in the conversation, I have no intention of indicting either choice. Each choice has value, and each choice has consequences. And each choice serves as an ethical fulcrum at

decision points that are critical to the future of the organization. For the purposes of differentiating between these two approaches, I am going to continue to refer to the work group-focused employee as a "leader" and to the employee who concentrates attention upward in the chain of command as a "director."

Check Out This Example

To illustrate, let's look at a completely hypothetical instance. The manager calls a pre-budget meeting and says, "This is a really tight year. I don't want to see any requests for budget increases in this budget process."

The department head who is a director calls a staff meeting and says, "The manager has told us that this next year is going to be really tight, and she does not want to see any requests for budget increases. I know we have been understaffed for awhile now, and we have been getting more and more complaints about response time, but we are just going to have to pull together and tough it out through one more year."

The department head who is a leader calls a staff meeting and says, "The manager has told us that this next year is going to be really tight, and she does not want to see any requests for budget increases. I know we have been understaffed for awhile now, and we have been getting more and more complaints about response time. Justifying another position is going to be difficult for me to do. But it is my responsibility to do what is in my power to make our part of the organization succeed."

"You tell me how badly we need the new position and whether you are willing to help me put together the case for it. Or tell me that it is not worth the effort in this environment, and we will just do our best for the next year. I can't guarantee that we'll get the position if we try, but I can guarantee that if we don't try, we will not get it."

This leader may succeed in getting the new position and may improve the response time. He may also be perceived by the local government administrator or other department managers in the organization as not being a team player. This is always the risk to a leader for placing the greater emphasis on the work group.

The director may show longer response times, more complaints, and higher turnover but may be perceived as more of a team player and more responsive to the needs of the larger organization.

These consequences are not predictable without a knowledge of the particular culture of the organization. For instance, if a mid-level manager's philosophy is that the council leads her and she leads the organization to follow the direction of the council, then she is a director and will see people who follow her direction as being valuable to her performance of her duties. On the other hand, if the manager's philosophy is that the council and the employees work together to serve the needs of the local government, she is a leader who is going to value the people who are most successful at problem solving.

If every worker who has ever been asked to describe the best supervisor of his or her career lists the same traits, why are there so many ineffective managers in the workplace?

Every manager works in a continuum between leadership and directorship and moves back and forth along that continuum. But individuals also make a personal decision about whether they will choose to be leaders or whether they will be directors. This is the choice that governs managers' supervisory styles and how they behave in crises.

Neither style guarantees personal career advancement because organizational values change over time, and different boards of directors and different chief executive officers value behaviors differently.

Four Questions

The purpose of this article has been to provoke some thought, or maybe just to provoke. But along the way, my intention has been to lay down four challenges:

1. If you are an entrepreneurial leader, are you holding your managers accountable to the same set of values to which you hold yourself?
2. If you are an autocratic director, are you locking up talent and motivation that your organization badly needs?
3. If you are the person responsible for hiring a manager, are you looking at the performance record of the organization that a given candidate has managed?
4. If you are a young manager, are you making a conscious choice about whether you will be a leader or a director?

For managers who commit themselves to build a trust-based leadership style that involves the work group in the success of the organization, this is the watershed decision. It is possible to predict the consequences of a trust-based style on the performance and success of a work group. It is not possible to predict whether this success will be perceived as valuable by the governing body or whether it will result in promotions for the person who successfully leads the work group.

However, it is a near-certainty that the leader will be more challenged and will have more fun at work than will the director. The choice is yours.

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