

September 2019

ONcall

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Growing Leaders from Your Staff

Encouraging and finding new leaders should be at the top of any good manager's priority list. While some administrators see emerging leadership in their staff as a potential threat to their own management, there's almost no downside to encouraging involvement and increased responsibilities. Good managers delegate, great managers foster leaders. The more you encourage people to take on responsibility, the stronger your team will be and the more they, and you, can achieve.

Recognizing potential

Among your staff, how do you determine the best candidates for leadership? In meetings and interactions with your staff, look for the following:

Staff who state their goals. A staff member who states what they want to achieve and is taking action is an ideal candidate for leadership. A teacher or staff member expressing initiative is a good sign. Giving them a leadership position could help them further their goals and hone their focus, as well as letting them know their goals are valued.

They have a lot of questions. Staff who ask good questions are attempting to clarify situations and workplace functioning. They care about understanding. Questions can be an expression of concern. This way of expressing interest can sometimes be grating, but when they have a leadership position, they may be more likely to see solutions to their queries.

New hires. Fostering leadership among new staff facilitates a sense of belonging to the team. When they understand that leadership is expected of them, this aligns with your overall goals and can fast track them to being a valuable member of your staff.

A complainer. Staff members who express problems or bring up issues are great recruits for leadership. Thank them for recognizing areas that need improvement and enlist them to lead a plan toward a solution. For example, a teacher who expresses concerns about a lack of art supplies might enjoy leading a drive to bring more supplies to your school.

How do I encourage leadership?

Show exemplary leadership. Be a great leader. Children aren't the only ones who learn by example. Clear communication and mutual respect are the foundation of healthy work environments. Working on your own leadership skills will make you a valuable resource and support to the people you want to foster for leadership. You need to exhibit qualities and traits you hope to see in your staff. You can't expect others to be on time if you're always running late. You must lead by example.

Reduce consequences. There's no growth without risk and your staff needs to know it's okay

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to make mistakes. No one should have a fear of failure. Not everything is going to work, not every goal will be achieved. But if the cost of failure appears too high, your leaders may feel it's not worth trying. Failure can be another chance at improvement. When your team knows they'll be supported even if they fail, they will feel more secure. They need to know their effort is valued, even if the result misses its mark.

Move them out of their comfort zone. The best leaders and teachers watch their staff or students exceed their expectations of themselves. Giving staff assignments or challenges to solve outside their comfort zone encourages new approaches to problem-solving and builds confidence as they learn to think in new ways. Each challenging project is another opportunity for them to develop their own leadership style.

Promote growth and success. When you recognize a person's strengths, use them! Start them out with achievable goals to foster success. Then move on to more challenging tasks or projects. Improved skills should lead to increased responsibility. Encouraging self-improvement and providing opportunities for it is vital for cultivating leadership.

Transparency and clarity. At some point, each of us has had questions about situations at work. Letting your team know as much as you can about what problems are present, and what work is needed is key information. Being transparent with your staff exhibits trust. When everyone has the same information, communication is improved and staff have a better appreciation for each other's goals. Part of clarity is making sure each person understands what is expected of them and each other. When they can see the big picture and their role in it, and everyone understands the goals of your organization, they may step up to lead with solutions.

Provide training. A person may be ready for the responsibilities of leadership but lack the skills. Whether you're training leaders or not, every workplace could benefit from workshops in problem-solving, conflict resolution, communication skills, planning and coalition building. Some employers fear that by offering workshops or further training and development, they might be educating their employees to leave for someone else's business. But as the joke goes, what if you don't offer those things and they stay?

Goals. Goals. Goal!

Your desire to elevate your staff's commitment and responsibilities shouldn't be a secret. Letting them know that you value their opinions, respect their potential, and believe in their capacity to be good leaders can be a huge morale boost, in addition to being good practice. Leaders learn by watching other leaders, and you have the opportunity to show them that you expect them to be equal owners in their own leadership training.

Fostering leadership in your organization takes time and planning. The benefits of having your staff know you are invested in their growth and potential is a major morale booster. When you're interested in sharing responsibilities and positive outcomes with your employees, when you're encouraging and fostering growth, you will find that greater success and a happier, higher functioning work environment is an inevitable bonus.

Contributed by Jack Sanderson, a Los Angeles-based freelance writer and project facilitator.