Use Your Leaders for Good

When a manager harnesses a leader's skills and exploits them for the good of the company, everyone benefits in the end. If a leader's skills are misused and not optimized, the team and the company will likely fail to reach their highest potential.

One of my mentors shared a leadership principle with me: "When you see talent, harness it and then exploit it." This provided excellent guidance on who the real leaders are in an organization and how to get the most out of the resources they provide. But are your leaders being exploited for good or for bad? This is an excellent question to ask any level of management in an organization. Let's examine how today's leaders are being used.

When we speak of exploiting leaders in this context, it's meant in a positive way. In a horse race, for example, a jockey exploits a horse's strength to guide the pair to victory. A horse can't win the race on its own. The horse may have all the experience and strength in the world, but it can't cross the finish line first and allow the race team to reap the rewards of the winner's circle without the jockey's guidance. The horse needs to be guided by the jockey both in direction and by the full and efficient use of its strength in order to finish a race. And that's what management needs to do with the leaders in an organization.

Recognizing Leaders

As you probably guessed, the "leaders" I'm talking about aren't necessarily employees in management or supervisory positions. I'm talking about the natural leaders within a team or organization that help drive the value-added work

of others and the company. I once had a manager explicitly say to me, "There's room for only one leader on a team." I respectfully disagree with this philosophy because I know leadership qualities should be welcomed, encouraged, and definitely "allowed," no matter the employee's job title or position.

Leaders take time to first plan where they want to go. They don't react without thinking and then find themselves in chaos miles down the road. Real leaders share information rather than hoard it only for themselves. Leaders prefer to improve continuously instead of maintaining the status quo simply because it's easier and more comfortable to keep doing things the way they've always been done. This innovative approach leads to having a better end result that's streamlined and automated so that working smarter—not harder—prevails at the end of the day, and bandwidth is expanded because more work can be done with less.

Leaders seek the chal-

lenges above the normal workload where other employees cling to their job descriptions. True leaders will work to make things better for themselves and the team. Leaders design quality at the front end of a product or process because it will yield long-term savings. Not addressing the root cause and just making changes to a process to get you through one reporting cycle, or "band-aiding," is a short-term remedy and will only create long-term waste and erode profits, leading to an unsustainable future. Thankfully, lead-

ers don't keep their heads down; they look around, see a need, and try to fill it. Leaders help generate ideas on where improvements can be made. But both management and leaders have to be open about it, creating a transparency that allows for innovation and growth as well as accepting the risk and failures when important lessons are learned, which effectively gives leaders the benefit of the doubt when things don't go perfectly.

Create a Thriving Culture

With the manager in the role of the jockey and the leader in the role of the horse, let's talk about what the racetrack or landscape should look like. Creating a cul-

ture that's appealing to leaders is very important because they're the ones being harnessed and exploited. Your main motivation is retention: to keep talent engaged and contributing to the long-term success of the company. The tone at the top will determine if it's a fair playing field or not. Hopefully, your organization believes in and promotes trust, communication, and strategic vision as well as embracing change and valuing quality over quantity. Trust is a requirement, not an option, for a high-performing organization.

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Trust creates a cohesive and open team environment that respects and supports others and what they bring to the table.

Communication should be upfront, open, continuous (not just at evaluation time), and flowing in both directions. First things first: Managers should be able to recognize a leader. An "A player" is someone who has the experience, credentials, or knowledge to perform at a high level and goes beyond the status quo. "A players" should work on more strategic and complex projects. They shouldn't be relegated to doing lower-level tasks, such as manual keying, because it definitely isn't the most effective way to utilize their skills.

Today's finance organizations should know how to properly support a leadership framework to enable, not hinder, leaders. For example, most accountants will work tirelessly to fulfill their job duties because that's what is expected, right? Let's take a closer look. The manager's responsibilities are to set the strategic focus of the team and to listen, coach, and support the team while exploiting the leader's skills for the good of the company. Managers shouldn't use up a leader's skills by piling on work until he or she can't see the light of day, essentially setting up the leader to fail rather than succeed. I've seen the greatest companies drown in their own data because they didn't know how to use it. They could have developed key performance indicators (KPIs), management by objectives (MBO), or management by exception (MBE) reporting to lift them out of the details and help them see the big picture. High-performing professionals aren't likely to tolerate inefficiency or lack of strategic focus for very long. Leaders come into an organization, adapt to the framework, and then go to work expanding their focus to the high-profile projects that need to be completed. Rewarding initiative and showing appreciation goes a long way when it comes to creating a culture where leadership skills are truly valued.

Continuous Improvement

Organizations should make investments in both people and tools to aid in continuous process improvement projects and never settle for the status quo. Members

of the finance department should be the strategic leaders of every company. Settling for the status quo is like using a five-year-old reporting package, sitting back, and thinking it's good enough to support the businesses of today. I get it: A lot of companies still run their business by using Excel. But there are other tools available to make dynamic and robust processes and reporting more efficient. For example, think-cell is a PowerPoint productivity tool that links charts to Excel input files. QlikView and Tableau are great programs for developing dashboards.

Leaders will choose to engage in critical thinking and strategic focus rather than handling the mountains of data out there. Just because the data is available doesn't mean all of it has to be consumed at once. It's like the old saying, "There's only one way to eat an elephant: One bite at a time."

The finance department should find ways to rise above the details and allow the more strategic work to be the priority. Give your employees every opportunity to add real value to the organization by making the investments needed for an efficient and organized finance function.

Best Practices
Consider using these strategies when developing a high-performance culture. A good practice is to hire people stronger than you as a baseline, trust them, and let them go to work! Reward, don't punish, leaders for thinking outside the box. Be on the lookout for leaders who are being underutilized. If you hear an em-

ployee say, "I can do more," it's a sign that a leader's skills aren't being utilized to the fullest potential and that circumstances need to improve quickly for everyone involved.

The manager and leader should often collaborate side by side to understand and agree on what's needed to fully support the team's daily objectives while also raising the bar and completing more value-added projects. Otherwise, if you ignore the issues and try to avoid the situation, the entire team will suffer.

Break from the status quo mentality by using the "Today model." If you do the same old things that you've always done, you will get the same old, stagnant results you've always gotten. If you want a better tomorrow, you must change what you're doing and how you're doing things today.

Also become familiar with the Pygmalion effect and Golem effect.

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The Pygmalion effect is the phenomenon in which the higher the expectations placed upon people, the better they perform. On the contrary, the Golem effect is where low expectations lead to a decrease in performance. Having the knowledge of these two principles can forever change how a manager approaches his or her very important role as a people manager. These effects are two forms of self-fulfilling prophecy. Henry Ford said, "If you think you can or you think you can't, you're right." The Pygmalion and Golem effects are the same: If you expect the best, you're probably going to get the best, and if you expect the worst, you're probably going to get the worst.

Don't Waste Your Leaders
My call to action is for organizations to utilize their resources in the best, most efficient way possible and to cultivate a work environment that's conducive to stimulating a more productive, strategically focused, and, above all, sustainable future.

A big thanks to my mentors for their support and for allowing me to make valuable contributions to the organizations I've worked for. Real leaders know that a key to success is recognizing talent, harnessing it, and then exploiting it. **SF**

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