



Employees want leaders 'who are worthy of their trust'

If the people who report to you were asked what your greatest strengths are, how might they respond?

What is it that you do that helps others become better tomorrow than they are today?

How are you a great leader?

Since 1987, James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner have conducted a global study on the qualities that people admire in their leaders. They ask survey recipients, "What qualities do you most look for and admire in a leader whose direction you would willingly follow?" Not surprisingly, after administering the questionnaire to over 75,000 people around the globe, in years of growth and recession, the four characteristics that consistently rank in the top four include:

- » Honesty.
- » Forward-looking.
- » Inspiring.
- » Competent.

This speaks to the fact that employees want leaders who are worthy of their trust, who lead with their hearts and their heads, and who create a balance between relationships and results. They want leaders who care as much about how success is achieved as the results that are achieved.

Let's take a closer look at these four attributes:

1. Honesty

Honesty consistently emerges as the single most important factor that employees look for in their leaders. This speaks to the fact that if an individual is going to follow someone, they want to know their leader is a person of high integrity and solid character – someone who they can trust.

I once heard Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf say, "The main ingredient of good leadership is good character. This is because leadership involves conduct, and conduct is determined by values." Values



define a leader because they influence how a leader behaves, makes decisions and engages with others. A leader who values diversity of thought, gender, color, religion, etc. will lead differently than a leader who wants to be the supreme decision maker.

Honesty creates a climate of trust. A leader who is willing to raise his hand and say, "I don't know" gives permission to others that it's okay to be vulnerable. A leader who relinquishes control to those who are more competent demonstrates self-confidence. A leader who owns her mistakes publicly when it impacts the organization demonstrates courage and humility.

A leader sets the moral compass for how the organization is expected to behave, and in doing so, inspires others to become personal leaders who embrace these same values.

2. Forward-looking

A vision inspires people to a better tomorrow. It paints a picture that stretches employees to imagine a different and better future.

Visions that are infused with animation – story, metaphor and analogy – build a bridge that allows employees to see it, hear it, touch it and feel it. Martin Luther King Jr. understood and used the principle of image and story well. In his short, five minute, “I Have a Dream” speech, he described his vision of freedom by painting a picture of “little black boys and black girls (joining) hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.” The simplicity of the image captured the essence of the message. People could see it. They could describe it. And in five minutes, he shifted people’s visions from what was to what could be.

Stories allow people to internalize what the vision means to them and communicate it to others. If this is something that doesn’t come easily to you, consider reading Paul Smith’s book, “Lead With A Story.” Each chapter is filled with stories and metaphors that you can use immediately, or that at the very least can help you get the creative juices flowing.

3. Inspiring

Employees draw energy from their leaders. The enthusiasm conveyed by the conviction of their words and alignment of their actions is perceived to be a direct reflection of their personal commitment to the vision. When a leader speaks with sincere excitement about the future, they

are filled with hope.

However, during times of rapid change, people often feel overwhelmed, discouraged, worried or fearful. This is the time to acknowledge their successes. Small wins can become quantum leaps over time. Be real about the path that lies ahead so expectations are realistic. Infuse the organization with your personal brand of encouragement. They need to know that you have their back when traversing through mucky trenches.

4. Competent

Employees want to know that their leaders have the strategic and technical expertise to lead them to that better future. They will ask, “Has this leader done this before?” “How successful was she?” “What’s his track record?” “Is she competent to deal with the difficult situations when they arise?” “What’s his plan?” “What role will I be expected to play?”

More times than not, leaders lack some of the required competencies to get the job done, so they call on the power of the team. Influence isn’t measured by the leader’s title, but by the people the leader empowers and engages to accomplish the vision. An effective leader surrenders to others the responsibilities that best align with their personal strengths. In doing so, she creates a powerhouse of ideas, creativity and intellectual muscle-power that gets the right work done.

As a result, good transforms into excellence, talent into expertise, and creativity into new ways of doing business. ■

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