

How Leaders Succeed—They Direct!

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In this “How Leaders Succeed” **Leadersynth** series, we first introduced the topic, and then explained in our last three editions that leaders learn, empower, and achieve. In this fifth edition, we focus on the importance of directing the work of others. As a reminder, we believe that, to be a successful LEADER, it is critical that you engage consistently in each of the following behaviors:

- Learn
- Empower
- Achieve
- Direct
- En-spire
- Renew

Direct. In a recent Harvard Business Review (December 2013), Daniel Goleman (author of the seminal book, **Emotional Intelligence**, and several subsequent books on the topic), makes the case that a primary task of leadership is to direct the attention of others. To do that most effectively, he reasons, leaders must be able to focus and direct their own attention.

Our experience with leaders at many levels in a wide variety of organizations concurs with Goleman’s assessment. We have seen that a primary characteristic of successful leaders is their capacity to clearly and engagingly direct the work efforts of others. Successful leaders are able to focus their own efforts on the desired end result, and they are capable of helping others focus on this.

We know from experience and research that teams function most effectively when their leaders:

- encourage open communication and feedback,
- provide clear roles and lines of authority,
- foster respectful relationships, and
- ensure that all members participate and feel ownership.

A key function, then, of a team leader is to establish clear goals and lines of decision-making and accountability. Leaders inspire and direct the work of others by grounding them in the team/organization mission, displaying the organization’s values in their behavior and encouraging it in others, and casting a motivating vision and strategy to propel the team forward.

Clear Vision, Strategy. Directing others to get the work done is, in large measure, the result of casting a vision that energizes and enrolls, and then developing a strategy to achieve that vision. Not that leaders must necessarily do this on their own. Quite the contrary in most situations, listening to the ideas of the rest of the team and leveraging their thoughts to create the vision and strategy is a very effective way to build buy-in with the team.

In a conversation last week with a senior leader whom I am coaching, she asked for my help in building an agenda for a team retreat. I suggested providing development assessments for each team member, using the results to offer individual feedback before the retreat, and then sharing strength/weakness themes for the team when we meet together as a group. For her part, she saw her role as developing the vision for 2014 and delivering it in a motivating fashion in front of the group. However, she indicated that this was not a strong suit of hers, and she expressed doubts about her ability to do a good job at it.

It surprised her when I said, “Well, you don’t need to be the one creating the vision on your own, and it’s not up to you entirely to motivate and energize the team for 2014.” I suggested that, instead, she meet with each team member to gather their ideas about the vision/strategy for 2014, and then include these in the final form that she presents at the retreat. That way, it would be a joint vision statement. Further, I suggested that she assign each team member to a specific role on the retreat agenda, so that each member would share ownership for the retreat success.

Inspirational Direction. Sometimes, directing the work of others does mean standing up in front and providing the structure and encouragement to get the job done. Other times, it means leveraging members of the team to foster buy-in and deliver results. The inspirational leader taps into the needs of most team members to be part of a bigger cause, one worthy of increased efforts on their part. Creating the big picture—either on your own, or with the ideas of others—inspiring hope and motivation in team members, and persuading them to follow you in pursuit of the vision and strategy, are critical elements of directing work efforts.

Fostering the desire to follow your lead is the foundation of directing the work of others and achieving results through them. One VP Sales I coached a number of years ago had learned how to lead in the military, and he had just received critical feedback from his team. They did not view him as an inspiring leader and had rejected his attempts to pull them together as a team through me.

As he looked over the feedback, he concluded that he needed to leave the organization. I asked him why he thought that, and suggested that we could probably turn things around. He said, “No, I learned in the military years ago that if your troops are not following you, you are not actually leading. I have been unable to inspire and provide leadership direction to these folks, so I just need to leave.”

Think about how you could do more to inspire and direct those people who report to you. We hope this fifth in a seven-part series has been helpful to you. Please give us your feedback, and share with us if you have an example from your own leadership experience that you think illustrates this successful leader component of providing direction. We look forward to hearing from you!