# Close the Door
## on What You Think You Know About Leadership

Many long-held ideas about leadership have not evolved with the changing world and are no longer effective. From open-door policies to problem employees, this article challenges conventional wisdom and provides new ways to think about how to be a great leader.

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Leaders are still subscribing to many things they have been told over the years – even though the world around them has changed and those adages have stopped producing good results. Now is the time to question the concepts and ideas that are hindering results, particularly the ones below.

## Everyone Has Problem Employees?

Whether you believe something is possible or impossible, you are absolutely correct. We have resistant employees because we hold the mindsets that it is impossible not to. But, in fact, there are organizations that aren't entrenched in drama and saddled by problem employees. If you have problem employees, it is because you:

- Hired them
- Rewarded their behavior
- Failed to coach and provide feedback when you observed their problematic behavior or
- Refused to terminate them when the coaching failed

Period.

Think about what you believe about leadership. Break through your own beliefs as a leader and find your personal level of accountability so you can get the results you want in your work environment. Challenge what you believe to be true. It is the beginning of the journey to having a peaceful life at work.

## Open-Door Policies Are Necessary?

As a leader, you may have learned that you should be approachable and have an open-door policy. Unfortunately, leaders incorrectly deduce that people should be able to approach them with anything they have on their minds.

Let's be very clear; it is a great quality to be approachable. However, being approachable without coaching and teaching employees during these open-door visits is not helpful.

Too many times, open doors are simply portals for drama. Take a moment to think about the people who have come to your office with the infamous question, "Do you have a minute?" Were those visits about the individual standing in your open door at that moment? Probably not. Most of the time, these visits are for employees to:

- Create a triangle where the two of you talk about a third person that is not there
- Safely vent, insist on some sort of anonymity for the situation they vented about, and remove themselves from the responsibility of taking any action
- Feel justified or self-righteous for judging the actions of others (who, again, are not present)

You must help employees understand what things are worth bringing up: information that is valuable to you as a leader or valuable to the workplace in some way. See the sidebar "Coaching Employees to Independence" for a helpful way to handle these one-on-one coaching sessions.

## Leaders Should Focus on Recognition?

The carrot philosophy of using rewards to induce a desired behavior is a very effective one when it is used in conjunction with accountability. Recognition is good, but only when you tell employees when they do a good job *and* when they do something that's not so great.

If you provide feedback only when they do a good job and reward them simply because it's been a while since they were last rewarded, it is likely you will create an environment where they come to expect rewards without doing anything to actually deserve them.

Worse yet, you may create an environment where employees don't believe you when you praise or recognize them. Why? Because, intuitively, people realize there are areas where they are falling short,

and they expect their leader to be the person that helps them overcome those obstacles – to develop them. So, counterbalance your recognition events with amazing coaching and timely performance management.

## The Next Generation Is a Challenge to Manage?

We aren't sure where this thought originated, but there are hundreds of organizations and training programs designed to help leaders learn to work with the next generation of employees. However, the issue is not the next generation; our pain comes because we haven't changed the way we manage so we can be effective with the next generation.

When a new generation enters the workforce, conventional leadership wisdom has us working to make them comfortable, catering to them, and working to perfect their circumstances. But, these practices are contrary to the practices that are really helpful.

It is likely true that the newest generation entering the workforce has been over-rewarded and under-coached, but that is no different than any generation before them. Leaders have stepped down instead of stepping up and then made up a story about "this new generation" to validate their inability to lead effectively.

Most of us didn't commit to our roles until an inspirational leader role modeled and insisted on greatness. Stop judging the next generation and become a great leader who coaches regularly so these young people can find a way to make a difference.

You will have to work hard at this because the next generation has a low tolerance for inefficiency. If you are trying to justify old methods for doing things that don't work anymore, they will challenge that. Use

their feedback to make improvements and stop judging them for being just like you were when you started working.

### Great Leaders Perfect Employees' Circumstances?

Conventional engagement surveys ask questions that suggest leaders need to ensure that employees have a best friend at work, trust in their leadership, and have very clear lines of communication.

Again, in theory, these are good things to strive toward. But once the action plan that was developed to address problems that surface from an engagement survey is over, ask yourself if your results are better. If the answer is "no," that is likely because engagement without accountability is useless.

Positive psychology – which emerged from the scientific study of what happens when things go right in life and shed light on what enables happiness, engagement, achievement, meaning, resilience, strengths, courage, and optimism – asserts that happiness is correlated to taking personal accountability for circumstances, thriving in given circumstances, *not* necessarily having cushy circumstances. Great leaders understand this and make sure that their people can succeed in almost any situation.

If leaders can provide cushy circumstances, that's great. But, that is not the reason people succeed or the reason they are happy. It is important that leaders actually challenge mindsets so employees can see their circumstances differently.

It is important to ask, "What would make your life easier?" and "What are you willing to do to get that?" or "How can I support that?" We have to share responsibility with employees to create environments where everyone thrives.

You have a choice: either make people more capable or try to fix their circumstances. More capable people

## Coaching Employees to Independence

Providing regular, one-on-one coaching is a key to developing capable, independent employees who can take action, resolve issues, and decrease drama in the workplace.

### Schedule Coaching Sessions

First things first, close your door and schedule almost all of your coaching sessions. If you are meeting with everyone individually, your purpose is to help with his or her development. So, schedule individual staff meetings regularly with your employees as a standard practice.

Let your employees know that you will have time to be completely focused on them in these standard meetings, whereas you will typically be preoccupied with other things if they just randomly stop by with issues.

### Remain Neutral and Redirect the Focus

Secondly, your role as the leader is to remain neutral and help to redirect your employees' focus to things they can control or have an impact on. In these meetings, allow employees to discuss issues that are barriers for them. If their concern involves such things as someone else's work attire, start time, or productivity level, redirect the conversation by asking them, "What have you done to help?"

Typically, the answer is that they've done nothing besides bring the issue to your attention – tattling. Your role is to remind them of the things they should be focused on in order to be an asset to the team. It is also to inform them that tattling is not helpful.

### Bring Together Parties in Conflict

If redirecting doesn't help, facilitate dialogue with the third party. In very few situations would it be wise to over-manage and take on this issue for the employee. You will very quickly learn how true or important the issues are once you offer to bring the other person into the dialogue. If there is truly a conflict that needs to be resolved, what better way than getting all the parties together for a conversation?

### Help Employees Recognize Their Capabilities

Finally, use these meetings for status updates and to share with each person what they do that is helpful and what they do that hinders. Base each person's individual goals on the outcomes of these conversations. Call the individual up to greatness and develop their capacity to see themselves as capable people who can take helpful action, not dependent employees who must come to you for every situation that arises.

are much more fun to lead. And, helping them become capable will help to keep them from suffering. People have pain because they aren't prepared for what they are being asked to do. And they aren't prepared because we aren't consistently developing them to be more capable.

Capability ensures that in the short run, employees can step up and move through the challenges. Over time, employees end up with lots of great experience that lets them know they can come up with a solution that makes sense. They learn that difficult circumstances are exactly the circumstances in which they must succeed.

tions in engagement surveys to account for accountability differences, though, action planning lists start to look like this:

- Better equipment to avoid errors
- Different hours to accommodate customers
- More ability to have input into decisions

Action plans based on surveying victims lead to working on things that aren't directly related to leading teams to success. When weighting results to favor more accountable employees, action plans focus on projects that drive revenue or reduce cost – a winning focus!

the processes already in place.

A fundamental role of a manager is to make sure people are following the processes. After that, personal accountability is necessary to drive a team to better business results by providing accurate feedback on a process first-hand. If we assume everyone is accountable on a broad level, we inadvertently create a situation where no one is accountable on an individual level. That is part of a recipe for losing.

### There Are No Stupid Questions?

Actually, there are. Please, stop providing *carte blanche* for people to

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### Everyone's Opinion Matters?

While it is good to survey employees, it is also important not to treat all employee opinions equally.

It is likely you have certain employees that are less accountable than others. For ease of explanation, let's call these employees "victims." From our research, we have learned that by default we end up surveying the victims because highly accountable people likely feel as though their concerns are already being addressed. So, they don't bring those issues up in a survey, or they refrain from taking the survey altogether.

Consequently, action planning to address survey concerns is a pain because it tends to favor the victims.

Action plans based on surveying all employees without weighting responses for accountability differences end up addressing things like:

- Onsite daycare
- Pay for parking
- Pizza parties
- Jeans days

When organizations include ques-

### There Is No 'I' in Team?

The original spirit of this statement was to encourage teamwork and prevent people from working in a vacuum. Teamwork is important so one group isn't resource-deprived while another has surplus. But, leaders have started to overuse this concept to a point where it is hindering results because there is hardly any focus on personal accountability.

There is an unintended correlation between companies focused on quality and the lack of personal accountability in the employee base. That is because quality improvement efforts involve process improvement. When processes aren't working, leaders focus on the process and not the people.

In general, this is a great idea. However, problems occur when leaders start telling people that issues aren't associated with people *at all,* but, rather, with the processes. So, when things aren't working, leaders try to make process changes, only to find out there is inconsistent use of

ask whatever they want. One ill-placed, stupid question can halt forward progress for days, weeks, or even months while people try to find the answer to what may be an unanswerable question. Some questions are actually posed as a way of resisting change. By asking every possible question, even irrelevant ones, progress can be halted.

Leaders sometimes try to justify and give answers to questions like, "Why do things keep changing?" Really? Is there an answer to that? As leaders, we have to help people ask better questions. Do not allocate resources to answering questions that don't lead to better accountability.

Instead help reframe questions and challenge employees to ask themselves things like:

- What can I do?
- How can I help?
- How can I improve my skills so I can contribute more?

Ask employees for three things they could do to get the information they want, build their skills to be

more effective, or be more helpful. Then, use your resources to help them get busy on their list.

## Change Is Hard?

Change related to such events as divorce, death, or the birth of a child is hard, and we need to give people time to adjust to those types of changes in their lives. Many organizations have employee relations departments and personal assistance programs to help people with those types of issues.

But, organizational change is not as hard as we make it out to be. Actually, we have been soft on building resilience in our people. Over time, we have allowed people to be resistant to change instead of building their com-petence to be better able to handle change. On top of that, we excuse people's inability to adapt to change, perhaps accepting that our employees' personality types are the reason they cannot become adept at handling change.

Ask people to sign up to get behind changes and actually capitalize on change. If they are unable (not to be confused with unwilling), create a development plan to help them become more adept.

If they are unwilling to step up, that is a different situation. In that case, ask them what their plan is to transition outside the organization. There is no third option. You cannot allow people to stay onboard when they refuse to engage. If you do, you have made a choice to have more drama on your team.

## Open the Door to a Great Work Climate

Step into your role as a leader and think critically about the things you do that could possibly add to less-than-ideal conditions in the work environment where you lead. The work climate is a reflection of your leadership. Make it a drama-free, peaceful, and successful place to work. **END**

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