



ENCOURAGE LEADERSHIP AT ALL LEVELS

Some benefits of leadership at all levels

1. Often unplanned or unanticipated challenges or opportunities will present themselves.

In high performing organisations individuals will step up and address the unforeseen challenges or seize the unexpected opportunities.

In low performing organisations you might expect the problems to fester and grow until someone with formal authority addresses them. Opportunities will likely go to waste for lack of interest.

2. When people step up and exercise leadership outside of their sphere of authority they are effectively delivering discretionary effort. Their role descriptions don't require 'leaderly' actions but they choose to step up anyway. Research shows that 'discretionary effort' can be immensely valuable to organisations. It's also often a sign of high performing, healthy organisations.
3. Exercising leadership within an organisation suggests a sense of ownership, accountability, and empowerment. According to research from the Institute for Corporate Productivity, these 3 characteristics correlate strongly with successful strategy implementation.

From managing to leading

The group of construction workers that Joe was monitoring were about to act in a way that was unsafe. As he had done many times before, Joe stepped forward and called 'Stop!' This was intended to prevent the unsafe work practise from occurring - protocols only required that Joe call a halt to unsafe work behaviours. Safety was his only responsibility in the context, and he wasn't actually part of the work team he was monitoring.

Yet, on that day, Joe sensed he could add more value to the team. Rather than simply bringing work to a grinding (and often disheartening) halt, Joe decided to step up and exercise leadership. Instead of leaning solely on the authority of his role, Joe wanted to exercise personal influence. He hoped individuals in the team would be motivated to adopt a safety mindset, rather than only change their behaviours when instructed.

Part of the challenge was that the team did not communicate well in English. Joe didn't speak their language either. But, in a flash of inspiration and a desire to make a difference, Joe used the translation features on his personal smart phone to better convey his message. Just this simple gesture was enough to profoundly alter sentiment over time. Soon, Joe was spending time getting to know members of the team in the dining hall. Not long after, he was invited to join the team on a fishing trip during time off.

Stepping up

Joe's management (supervisory) behaviours undoubtedly prevented safety incidents. But, it was his leadership behaviours that added the greatest and most enduring value. As a result of his approach, the team developed more of a safety mindset and stoppages were minimised. Also, both Joe and the team actually felt more motivated in their work. They probably all went above and beyond, contributing highly valuable 'discretionary effort'.

What is especially relevant is the fact that Joe hadn't ever had any leadership training. In fact, he'd likely left school early to pursue his trade. His training would have focused almost exclusively on skills for conducting his trade. A personal injury cut short his role as a tradie and he transitioned to a safety supervisor role, where he could still use his years of on-the-job of experience.

Even though it wasn't expected of him, Joe chose to step up and exercise leadership, with the aim of obtaining a better outcome for all involved. On its own, Joe's contribution is admittedly rather small. However, if each of the thousands of people who were working on that project stepped up and exercised leadership in their own small way, the overall benefits would be substantial.

No formal 'leader' mandate required

Although the degree of formality will vary, managers are appointed to their roles. Their primary source of authority stems from the position they hold. A subordinate's role is similarly determined – by role description, including any explicit or tacit levels of authority. As long as it is legal and reasonable, a manager's dictate is to be obeyed. The formal authority of a manager exists before that authority is exercised. Joe's position, as safety supervisor, gave him the authority to command that work practices he deemed unsafe should cease immediately. The team stopped on Joe's instruction because their role descriptions required it.

Although formal roles introduce some limitations, having structure provides a necessary degree of clarity. Importantly, that structure should make very clear the different accountabilities that are present.

In contrast, leadership can be exercised by anyone at work. Simply, if another is influenced towards a common goal by a particular behaviour then leadership has occurred. Essentially, the power of leaders is given by those who choose to follow, rather than being formally compelled. The moment team members responded to Joe's leadership behaviours, rather than just comply with his supervisory instructions, the individuals involved and the project were better off. In fact, Joe didn't need to rely any longer on his formal supervisory authority. Using leadership, he was also much more effective in his role!

What about you and your organisation?

Increasingly, there is recognition that leadership is needed at all levels within the organisation. . Hopefully you can recount many incidents where you have stepped up and exercised leadership, at times perhaps even 'beyond your pay-grade'! What about similar behaviour in others? Is your organisational culture one where leadership behaviour thrives at all levels? Alternatively, is the culture one that minimises, even extinguishes, such behaviours?

If leadership is thriving at all levels in the organisation, yours is a rather special culture! Chances are there's a deliberate effort to make it so. Importantly, do you know specifically what leads to that positive culture, to ensure people keep doing what's needed to sustain it? What is it that you and others do to maintain and even grow this desired kind of leadership culture?

If you don't see too much leadership at different levels within your organisation, why do you think this is the case? Organisational culture is complex, so the answers might not be that obvious. However, research shows that leadership at all levels is vital for business success, so it is well worth finding out!