Developing Your Direct Reports

One of the main characteristics identifying organizations of excellence is the commitment of top leaders to developing the skills of their people.

Most people want to grow. Most have aspirations to do well and be rewarded with more pay and greater responsibility. Most have dreams and goals they want to achieve.

Unfortunately, few companies have consciously built an environment where developing those under your authority is an expectation.

Why? I think it is oversight. It's an option most leadership teams have never considered. One purpose of my columns is to catch the attention of leaders and have them consider this possibility.

Can leaders change? Can the culture of an organization be converted to one where skill development of individuals is an important priority?

When the chief executive and the other top leaders realize the benefits of developing direct reports, dramatic improvements are possible. Sometimes replacing a key leader provides this initiative. Sometimes the leadership team requests an organizational assessment and this option is suggested.

The behaviors of the key leaders have to change, of course. They must hold frequent development discussions. They must provide challenging assignments and stretching tasks. They must become aware of each person's career goals. They must build a system that encourages and supports skill development. They must guide direct reports in building compelling development plans, then assist in executing them.

Conversions do not occur overnight. There is usually an initial burst of energy as people see a vision of a better work environment. But to sustain an improvement, discipline is required. If leadership skills were easy, everyone would have them. Repeatable, reliable systems need to be put into place and followed. Role models need to be recognized and rewarded.

You may wonder why I'm so committed to this concept of leadership development. A major reason is that it's all I knew for the first twenty-three years of my career. I chose to work with a company that followed these guidelines, written in its published "Statement of Purpose":

- We build our organization from within.
- We encourage and reward individual innovation, personal initiative and leadership, and willingness to manage risk.
- We maximize the development of individuals through training and coaching on what they are doing well and how they can do better.
- We evaluate managers on their record in developing their subordinates.

For the twenty-three years I worked with this company, every performance review included a look at the contribution I had made to building the skills of individuals under my authority. "Building organizational capacity" was an expectation of every manager.

When the facility where I worked was sold, I became an employee of a company with a very different history. I worked for seven years teaching leadership teams within that organization the benefits of leadership development--and how to build systems to make it happen.

There are three advantages to having leadership development as a value within your organization. The first one is direct and obvious. If you invest in building the skills of the people, the organization's quality, reliability, and productivity will improve.

The second advantage is less obvious, but perhaps more significant. Have you found that you learn much more when you have the responsibility to teach a topic than when you are merely a student? When you expect leaders to build the skills of their direct reports, the skills of the leaders grow dramatically!

The third advantage is associated with the senior management of the company. At my first employer, no president in the 175 year years of history had been hired from outside the organization. The risk an organization runs by choosing a new president from outside the organization is associated with "values." Someone whose career developed within the culture of the company is sure to embody those values. Someone selected from the outside may have superb business skills, but may also have some underlying perspectives that are inconsistent with the culture of the organization.

I invite you to consider whether a commitment to "developing direct reports" would be an initiative beneficial to your organization. Then talk with the other key leaders who could influence this improvement in your work environment.