

Whose Agenda are You Working?

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As a leader in your organization, your days are probably focused on the many “to do” items that are part of your organization’s strategy. Probably no one in your organization cares as much about both the short-term and long-term progress as you do.

You’ve built your organization carefully. You hire only individuals whose outlook on work and life fit well with your organization’s values and culture. People are in roles where they are able to exercise daily those activities they love doing. You’ve nurtured their commitment. Everyone seems to know where to put their energies, and folks keep offering suggestions for improvement. All seems good.

In your daily work however, you see something that could be better. You take your observations to the person responsible for that area, and you point out what he or she might do differently. You don’t want to micromanage, so you leave the situation alone for a few weeks to see what happens.

You go back two weeks later, and you’re not satisfied with the progress. In fact, you feel as if your recent observations have been ignored. You come to me frustrated, asking, “Why can’t I get Joe’s (or Mary’s) attention on this issue? The opportunity for improvement here is so obvious!”

Instead of answers, you might hear, “Whose agenda are you working, yours or theirs?”

You remember our past conversations. You’ve learned that if somebody else has a problem, you can help. Alternatively, if you have a problem and want some help, you probably will have to ask for it. Not only will most people not know you have a problem, many are so busy with their own problems that they won’t even think to offer you their help. (Such is the curse of leadership!)

You have two options. One is to be more specific and directive with Joe or Mary. Go back and point out that the circumstances from two weeks ago still exist, and be clear that’s a problem for you. Ask if Joe or Mary would be willing to allocate time and other resources to correct the situation. Gain his or her commitment, and the next time you check, the condition will probably be acceptable. Because you are a person in authority, you’ll usually obtain a beneficial short-term outcome.

However, you are a leader who wants to build leaders for the future. You want Mary and Joe to develop a more comprehensive vision and greater initiative to take appropriate action. Consider the challenge of this second option. How often do you ask Mary and Joe, “In what ways are you working to improve? And how can I help you overcome the challenges you are facing?”

If your agenda is to ask that question more frequently, you’ll be more effective over the long-term in serving those you influence. You can’t control another person’s motives or actions. If Joe and Mary are not focused on becoming more aware and on making improvements in their behaviors, you will be continuously frustrated by their lack of doing what you think they should do.

To be more effective as a coach and mentor, start working on their agenda and not yours. Be careful that your momentary observations are not seducing you into creating an agenda that you presume is consistent with Joe’s or Mary’s.

As a leader, it is so easy to presume that other people want your advice! Many times, I’ve put large quantities of energy into advising someone who showed me eventually that he or she never really wanted my help.

Here’s my suggestion. Every couple of weeks, ask your direct reports, “What obstacles are limiting your efforts to expand your contributions? In what ways could I support your efforts to improve?”

Two weeks later, go back to Joe or Mary and ask for feedback. “What could I do differently in the future to help you accomplish the objectives you have for becoming more effective?”

While you are in the conversation, ask Mary or Joe to recommit to what they are planning to do to enhance their own improved capability. Make note of these intentions so that you can follow up appropriately as a participant in the shared accountability.

There will be oversights, of course. Mary or Joe may not recognize their need to become better listeners, or delegators, or any of the many other skills required of effective leaders. You have every right to suggest opportunities for improvement where they exist. In fact, it is your responsibility as a conscientious, committed builder of future leaders.

If you do this consistently, you’ll move away from specific “to do” items and move toward developing Joe’s and Mary’s underlying skills and confidence. As they become more effective, you won’t have to point out as many unacceptable conditions in their areas of responsibility. Instead of working on the content of Joe’s and Mary’s job, you’ll be supporting them in growing their effectiveness over time.

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