You're a Role Model--Choose to Be a Mentor, Too

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If you are in any kind of leadership role, you are a role model. You don't have a choice. People are watching you all the time, observing your every behavior.

If you have good leadership skills, people want to see what you do under a variety of different conditions. They copy what you do, believing it will help them. And if they do what you do with some degree of proficiency, they will likely have beneficial outcomes.

If you have poor leadership skills, people are still watching you. They are usually astounded, of course, wondering how you ever rose to such a responsible position. Still, they observe, making mental notes of what NOT to do! I've often said that you can learn very valuable lessons from individuals who are poor leaders--though it may be painful and awkward in the short term!

You need not make a conscious decision to be a role model. It just comes with the territory. You may even prefer to give up being a role model, but you have no choice.

Further, being a role model takes no extra effort. Most of the time, you aren't even aware that others are watching. You normally won't know what folks are thinking or saying about you, either. Some of you reading this article simply won't believe anyone looks to you as a role model.

If you want confirmation of my hypothesis, just watch any younger brother or sister. It doesn't have to be YOUR younger brother or sister. ANY younger brother or sister will do. See how much the younger strives to be like the older. Oh, don't expect that either of them will use the term "role model." They'll call it something like "being a copycat." The younger mimics without realizing it, and the older one hates it!

Is it healthy for your organization that you are a role model? Probably. If you are a good leader, others in your organization are learning from watching and emulating you. If you are a poor leader, others in your organization are learning what NOT to do, which is of at least some value.

If you truly want to expand the capacity of your organization, however, choose to become a mentor. When you do, you'll not only build junior leaders faster; but you'll ultimately improve your skills. Really!

Let me explain. Becoming a mentor requires a conscious choice. Why? Because you will start spending time patiently explaining how you make decisions and why. You may not have been doing much of that in the past. You may have arrogantly thought, "Hey, I'm the boss. I don't have to explain to anyone why I decide what I do!" As a leader, you have an implied responsibility for building future leaders.

You don't have to call yourself a mentor to be one. It may serve you better (and serve the future leaders you support) by NOT calling yourself a mentor. That word characteristically refers to someone who is outside the chain of command of the mentee being served. Yet your direct reports especially would benefit by learning from you why and how you respond to the various situations you face.

Becoming a mentor will require you to challenge your motives and clarify your thought processes. You may have been executing much of what you do from habit. But what assurance do you have that your habits are the most effective choices you could be making?

When you legitimize a less experienced individual asking you challenging questions about your thought process, you'll find yourself engaged in dialogue where you'll frequently hear, "Why?" Don't expect the person asking the questions to be satisfied with a surface response. He or she will want to "go deep," pushing you to think beyond your everyday decisions to imagine even very atypical situations.

Your openness to your mentee's questions will provide fertile ground for growth. Your mentee will think he or she is the beneficiary, but you will realize that you are being stretched like never before. You win, your mentee wins, your organization wins, and your customers win. Those are beneficial outcomes!