

In the article below, I reference two studies.

I've previously written about both of them. To access either or both articles, go to the "Article Archives" page of my website: <http://www.buildingfutureleaders.com/article-archives.html>

You can then find the articles in alphabetical order.

Dennis Hooper, July 10, 2010

## **Building Competence Requires Intentional Effort**

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2010, published in the *Houston Home Journal* on Saturday, July 10, 2010

Step back into your personal history for a moment. While you were still in school, you obtained your first job. You were paid by the hour to do a series of tasks. Someone provided simple directions, and from there you were expected to improve your skills by actually doing the work.

Later, you accepted full-time employment. Your initial responsibilities probably required you to again learn some functional or technical skills. After years as an individual producer, somebody recognized your abilities and promoted you. Now you are in a leadership position.

Or maybe you started your own business. It took you awhile to master the skills necessary to deliver the product or service to your customers. Your business grew. You started hiring people, and they now look to you for leadership.

Functional and technical skills are absolutely necessary for sustaining success. New employees joining your organization today start by learning those skills. Further, many professional associations identify and periodically update competencies for their particular technical specialty.

For example, a colleague recently led me to a website displaying “Professional Competencies for Health Science Librarians.” With the rapid expansion of medical knowledge and the proliferation of electronic devices for storing, retrieving, and displaying information, you can imagine how rapidly the skills for success as a medical librarian are changing!

But who updates the descriptions of competencies required of leaders? How does a newly appointed leader learn what expertise is required? And how does a particular leader (you) acquire those skills?

Does your organization have an established process for building leadership competencies? Most readers, unfortunately, will answer, “No.” Why is that? Because most organizations assume that you already have all the skills you need to lead! Or that you’ll find a way to pick up what you lack.

Let’s look back into your history again. If you are like most, you went from follower to leader based on a presumption. Somebody assumed that because you became rather masterful at executing the functional or technical skills of the organization, you are qualified to lead.

To figure out what skills are required of you as a leader, you might ask, “What do the people I lead need or want?” The obvious suggestion is to go to those individuals and ask them!

I realize you may be reluctant to do that. First, your team members may worry you don’t know what you’re supposed to be doing! Second, you probably believe that someone has already studied what followers generally want from their leaders.

They have. James Kouzes and Barry Posner asked people what qualities they look for and admire in their leaders. Their report is in the 2007 book *The Leadership Challenge*. Individuals expect their leaders to be honest, forward-looking, inspiring, and competent. (See my January 6, 2004 article entitled “What Followers Expect of Leaders.”)

An independent study was conducted by the Gallup organization. They interviewed 10,000 random followers, asking them to identify the leaders having the most positive influence in their daily lives. Then they asked each individual to identify three words that best describe what those leaders contribute to their lives. The results of the research are reported in the 2008 book *Strengths Based Leadership* by Tom Rath and Barry Conchie. (See my February 7, 2009 article entitled “Leadership from the Viewpoint of Followers.”)

As you can imagine, lots of descriptive words were identified. But four main categories clearly rose to the top. Followers have a very clear picture of what they want and need from their leaders: trust, compassion, stability, and hope.

Knowing what constituents want from their leaders, the question becomes, “What skills allow me to generate these deliverables? When and how do I practice those skills so that I can master them?”

Most people with leadership responsibilities never ask these questions. They pick up an occasional training class or professional conference and expect that to suffice. Let’s be honest; random improvement has never been the driver that refined the skills of excellent leaders!

Genuine improvement for you is more likely to occur if you’ll make an intentional choice to build your skills. Your motivation must come from within. Your boss can support your efforts but can’t make the decision for you.

Look for opportunities to experiment. Seek feedback from those who observe you and experience your actions. As you find specific approaches that seem to work, practice until the behaviors become natural for you.

You can probably survive on what you do currently. But if you want improvement, either for personal career growth or to help your organization achieve excellence, make a conscious choice. You’ll be working tomorrow anyway. Why not be intentional about enhancing your leadership skills?

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