

Detecting and Supporting Informal Leaders

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When I work with a client company, I notice natural leaders who are actively supporting the objectives of the organization. I recently complimented an individual on her work, thanking her for being an informal leader within the organization.

Her response was genuine astonishment. She looked at me quizzically and said "I'm not a leader. Why do you say I'm a leader?" She paused for a moment, trying to understand why I would say such a thing. Then she asked again, "What do you mean when you say that I'm an informal leader?"

This article will help formal leaders become more aware of the natural leaders in their organizations. Raising the awareness of leaders is one of my best contributions. Informal leaders in any organization should be encouraged and supported to continue and even expand their positive influence.

In the situation above, the informal leader could have responded to my comment in a protective way. She might have thought I was criticizing her for taking initiative, or that she was being too directive with her teammates. Over the next couple of weeks, I met with her to affirm her natural instincts and to help her discover additional ways to positively influence her team.

Formal leaders can help their teams and themselves by recognizing and supporting their informal leaders. Unfortunately, these folks are natural resources who sometimes receive little attention.

Let's think for a moment about what "leadership" is all about. What really determines "a leader"?

Think about when you were a kid, and you played with the other kids in the neighborhood. How vivid is the image of that one kid who tended to influence what everybody else decided to do? Did some adult appoint that person as the leader of the other kids? Of course not!

Yet many people think of "leadership" as an appointed position. Why is that? Somehow the myth of positional leadership has become entrenched in our society.

We humans think in terms of cause-and-effect, but we sometimes get confused about which is the cause and which is the effect. Does the individual influence others better because he or she is in a position called "leader"? Or is the person in the position of "leader" because he or she influences people well? Which is the cause, and which is the effect?

Leadership is not a position. Leadership is the ability to influence others, preferably in productive and beneficial ways. With that thought in mind, you can easily detect informal leaders in your organization.

Informal leaders likely have never been appointed as having authority over anyone else in the organization. Yet by observing the individual, he or she clearly has influence with others.

How can you recognize an informal leader? Let me share an example we'll call Carol.

People respect Carol. They watch what she does and they find consistency between what she says and what she does. Carol doesn't take advantage of people. She does the "right" thing even if she could take shortcuts and even if doing that right thing is not particularly easy.

Carol is interested in doing the job well. She doesn't look for ways to make herself look good, but puts energy against making the team look good by exceeding its objectives. She respects other people. When a decision is needed, she offers her opinion. She encourages others to offer their thoughts, too. If the group is stuck, she suggests a way to get unstuck.

Carol often assists other people. She seems to genuinely care about others. She cooperates. Somehow, she manages to come up with the necessary resources to accomplish the task. She knows what the desired outcome of the group is, and she is tenacious about moving in that direction.

Some people just seem to have those abilities. And those characteristics not only model appropriate behavior, but also empower other individuals as they mirror the example Carol provides. Wouldn't you love to have a few more Carols in your organization?

Carol just is who she is. But her natural instincts can be enhanced with a little effort on your part. So now that you recognize a Carol in your organization, what can you do to develop her strengths? Look for my article next week, when I describe a proven method for enhancing leadership skills.

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