

“How I Fit” and “Why I Matter”

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When my clients seek to improve their leadership skills, they also gain awareness on many different issues. That's the objective of this week's article. I want you to become increasingly aware that every individual under your authority seeks to understand “how I fit” and “why I matter.”

The Korn/Ferry Institute, a major researcher in leadership development, reports that favorable and compelling answers to these two questions represent top employee motivators. I contend that at some level, we all ask these questions about life in general.

We want to know how we fit with our family, our friends, and even our community. We want to know that we matter to at least some people and to whatever image we have of God. Oh, we don't ask these questions aloud (except maybe in an outcry of despair or anguish), but the questions are there, under the surface. We all want to be accepted, and we all want to make a difference.

What should you, as a leader be doing with this information? Because of your influence, you can provide positive impact both systemically and personally.

More than anyone else, you are responsible for identifying and communicating a compelling vision for your organization's future. As individuals evaluate options, they want to know that if they stay with your organization, they'll be contributing to something worthwhile.

If your organization doesn't already have a clear vision, you need not imagine one on your own. Your employees already have a personal vision of some sort (though few individuals have given it the thought necessary to articulate it clearly). Because they are currently part of your organization, their personal vision already aligns in some way with what they think their future entails there.

This energy naturally exists, so I encourage as much employee involvement in the generation of your organizational vision as possible. Find a good facilitator to design a process for capturing the imaginations of your existing teams. You'd be a part of that process, of course, so the vision won't be grossly out of alignment with your own beliefs and preferences.

Once articulated, the vision will live only if you routinely keep it “out there.” Your employees live every day in current reality. It's hard for them to envision something that is strictly an imagination. Yet if you routinely acknowledge “what is” and at the same time remind folks of “what could be,” the tension between the two naturally causes behaviors to move in the direction of the vision.

Okay, that's the systemic piece of your responsibility. The personal piece involves your guidance to your direct reports and your one-to-one engagement with every person under your influence.

Regarding your direct reports, your biggest impact is as a role model. How frequently do you take off your “I'm the boss and you're the subordinate” hat and put on the “You're important to me” hat?

I've found that the easiest and maybe the best way to help people feel that they fit and they matter is to kick back and ask those questions. Put them out on the table and formulate a conversation about them. Say, “We all want to know that we are accepted and that we matter. Let's talk for a few minutes about how you fit with this organization and how you make it better.”

Ask how work fits in with what's important in the rest of his or her life. Offer a few genuine words of appreciation for the person's role and contribution.

Acknowledge that you don't often talk about these matters, but you'd like to do it more often. Create an environment where the person feels comfortable sharing with you how he or she makes a difference. Above all, listen. Of course, treat whatever is shared with the greatest of respect.

Before you end the conversation, ask the individual to conduct similar conversations periodically with his or her direct reports. Simply by making this a routine conversation in your organization, your culture will be stronger.

If your organization is small enough, you should know every employee by name and some personal information about him or her. Each employee has a life outside your organization. What do they do when not at work? Who is important to them in their non-work world? How does their work fit into the rest of their lives?

If your organization is so large that knowing something personal about each employee is not realistic, I encourage a periodic informal meeting with representatives from every department. Start by revealing some of who you are as a person. Use this as an opportunity to remove some mystery about "the boss." Connect with individuals in a way that the normal daily pressures don't allow.

Ask your questions about being accepted and making a difference. Provide an environment where individuals feel comfortable, and one or two will start sharing. Listen and invite others to comment.

Every person wants to feel uniquely valued and accepted. You can do that, and it won't cost anything but a little bit of personal attention. You'll feel better for it, and so will they. And your organization's culture will be stronger for it.

Dennis Hooper helps leaders strengthen cultures, processes, and results. His articles are available on www.buildingfutureleaders.com. Contact Dennis at dhooper2@juno.com or 478-988-0237.