

What Do Your Direct Reports Want from You? (Part 2)

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This article continues where I left off last week. If you want a copy of that column, call or send an e-mail.

The purpose this week is to encourage you to initiate a dialogue with each of your direct reports. Out of those conversations will come some valuable information for you, a relationship that encourages providing mutual feedback, and the potential of improved performance by each of you.

Wouldn't that be a gift? You'll learn how you can better serve your direct reports.

"Not possible!" you might say. "Oh, very possible!" says I. However, you will have to do something that perhaps you've never done before. You'll ask those over whom you have authority what they look for in a boss—and compare that with what they see in you!

"Wait a minute!" you say. "What difference does it make whether my team members like what I do? They don't have to like my leadership style in order to do the work that they are assigned, do they?"

Of course not. They do the work or they lose their job, right? Unfortunately for many working people, that's the mental outlook of too many bosses! Don't let it be yours—there's a better way!

"The Law of Reciprocity" is an unwritten rule in our society. It's a social phenomenon, not overtly taught. It's sometimes expressed as "you reap what you sow." To learn more, put "The Law of Reciprocity" into any internet search engine and see what you learn.

If you give your direct reports the behaviors they want from their leader, they are more likely to reciprocate by supporting their colleagues and your customers in the manner you desire.

Would that be good for your organization? Would that be good for the results you are expected to achieve in your area of responsibility? Would that be good for the people under your authority?

Everyone wins! I like that! You will, too!

Here's how you do it. In a meeting of those under your authority, explain that you have recently read about the top twenty characteristics of a leader. Tell them you'd like their opinions. Give out a sheet of paper with the twenty characteristics listed. Ask them to think about what the most important characteristics are to them personally. Explain that in the next day or two, you'd like to hear from each person.

Then, meet with each person privately. Listen closely. Fight the temptation to offer your opinions. Make notes of the top five characteristics they value. Before they leave, ask them to share with you the top five characteristics they see in you. (If your culture has not previously developed healthy feedback systems, they may be reluctant to describe these. Don't put pressure on them!)

I recommend you complete the effort by coming back a day or two later and giving a composite report to your team. If you'd like to make some changes in your behavior based on what you've learned, say so. Be careful to promise only what you are actually willing to do, however. Ask them to help you by providing feedback and encouragement. This could be the start of something big!

Here are the twenty descriptors. They come from The Leadership Challenge by Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner: ambitious, broad-minded, caring, competent, cooperative, courageous, dependable, determined, fair-minded, forward-looking, honest, imaginative, independent, inspiring, intelligent, loyal, mature, self-controlled, straightforward, and supportive.

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