

I'm Your Coach, not Your Fifth Grade Teacher!

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Are you in a position of authority, accountable for some piece of responsibility in your organization? If you're not now, you soon may be. So, pay attention.

Which do you desire from your direct reports? Compliant followers or collaborative leaders?

Compliance occurs when individuals under your authority do what you tell them.

Collaboration occurs when they understand the mission and values of the organization, and they mobilize resources to achieve desired outcomes, no matter what new situation they encounter.

I hope that you prefer a collaborative culture. If your organization's not there yet, perhaps you can adopt that as your vision. There are multiple advantages to a highly collaborative workplace!

As a leader, you are probably faced with some direct reports who expect you to tell them what to do. They have the mindset of a student obeying their teacher.

I remember fifth grade well. Mr. Toselli was very smart. I respected him and worked to please him. Sometimes, however, the neighborhood baseball game just didn't allow time for homework. No, at age eleven, I was unaware that my teacher was preparing me to be a contributing citizen at age thirty.

By the time I was in college, my professors didn't care how much outside preparation I did. They assumed that I was responsible for my education. If I didn't want to prepare, that was my business.

You can't afford to be like those college professors. If you don't intentionally build future leaders, your business suffers. You care deeply about the quality and rate of growth of your team members.

How does a student in college evolve from just getting by to seeking out information that stretches the mind to new limits? Some individuals make that transition, don't they? A small number of students conduct research and collaborate with the professor rather than just occupy space in the classroom.

Are these qualities inherent in the student? Or does the environment stimulate that level of interest and drive? It's both, of course. So, let's translate from the college campus to your organization.

You need to both establish a nurturing environment and be very selective about who you hire onto your team. You want individuals who can go from dependent "students" learning your business to confident, competent contributors and coaches of other team members!

Does it bother you when you make a suggestion to your future leaders and they disregard it? Those individuals probably aren't being intentionally insubordinate. No, they probably were involved in their equivalent of my fifth grade baseball game; something was momentarily more important.

Still, you wouldn't have offered the recommendation if you hadn't thought it valuable. It's not easy dealing with such a situation, is it? You want those individuals to freely make their own choices, but when they overlook obvious beneficial opportunities, you wonder who cares more about their growth!

If employees continue to behave like dependent students, what can cause them to transition to interdependent contributors? Using the authority of your position, you may have to confront those who continue to languish in the comfort of being told what to do.

It may be appropriate to explain privately to a given individual that you expect him or her to assume control of future growth. You want to support, encourage, and coach, offering resources and insight. However, the initiative for further learning from this point must be assumed by the individual.

You could come down hard on the individual. You have the authority to do so. However, that likely won't develop the voluntary commitment to personal improvement that you want to nurture.

Further, you want to model the behaviors of a collaborator. You want individuals to seek your expertise when they need it, but you also want to foster their independent sense of confidence.

Your objective and motive is to serve the individuals under your authority, empowering them to serve their customers. You cannot afford to continue to be their teacher if you are going to serve as a coach for your team.

Use your authority to make your expectations clear. Then switch into collaboration mode to help each individual achieve what he or she needs to become a more effective leader and coach.