

Leadership Practices

by Dennis Hooper, published in the Houston Home Journal on Tuesday, December 16, 2003

This column addresses the question: "What do leaders do?" I think you will benefit greatly if, before you read further, you pause to ponder how you would answer that question for developing leaders.

In the Leadership Development Breakfast I host the first Wednesday of each month, we use John Maxwell on videotape to stimulate discussion about relevant leadership development topics. December's subject was the five leadership practices expressed by James Kouzes and Barry Posner in their book "The Leadership Challenge."

Based on their research, Kouzes and Posner describe five fundamental practices that enable leaders to accomplish extraordinary objectives. As you read these, consider rating your current behaviors. More importantly, then consider options for actions you might take to improve.

Challenge the process. I describe this to my clients as working ON the systems of the organization rather than just becoming mired IN the systems. New team members or volunteers are trained to work IN the existing systems and rarely to evaluate the appropriateness and effectiveness of what they do. It is the leader's unique role (often shared with some or all the team members) to step outside the "what" that is done daily and reflect on potential improvements in not only the "what", but also the "who", "how", "where", "when", and especially "why".

I also encourage the use of the SEE-DO-GET-REFLECT model. What an organization "gets" as outcomes is a function of what it does. If it continues to do the same things, no one should expect the outcomes to be significantly different. In reflecting on the outcomes and processes, leaders can usually see many opportunities for improvement. But this is rarely a casual or haphazard intervention. It is far more effective when conscious and intentional--and frequent!

Inspire a shared vision. Among the most important roles of leaders is to honestly and accurately acknowledge the current status of the organization while communicating how much better life will be in some future situation. Describing both current reality and "what could be" sets up a dynamic tension that stimulates activity to move the organization toward its desired future state.

The leader has the role of being the organization's visionary, considering what is desirable and possible, then articulating that potential and inviting people to engage. Because people live daily in the current state, the leader frequently and enthusiastically repeats the inspirational vision—otherwise, people lower their expectations so as not to be disappointed.

Enable others to act. I describe to my clients that perhaps the greatest responsibility of the leader is to create an environment that encourages others to use their God-given gifts. The leader's responsibility is to ensure that adequate resources are made available to those who are routinely doing the work of the organization. It is in creating this safe and hospitable environment and in providing the necessary resources that the leader most serves the individuals in the organization.

Model the way. The most powerful leadership guidance that my father gave me was to never ask anyone to perform a task that I was unwilling to do. Serving as an example is critical for the leader. People observe the leader's behavior and test it against his or her words and the shared values of the organization. Lack of consistency generates mistrust. People do what they see the leader do.

Encourage the heart. Repetitive work can be drudgery. Yet every organization needs the reliability of people with experience. People want assurance that their work has meaning and value. Leaders can't rely on a team member's paycheck to provide that encouragement. It comes from personal connection, genuinely expressed through eye-to-eye contact and a description of how that individual's efforts uniquely contribute to the greater good being accomplished by the organization.