

Developing Leadership Competencies – Tips for Success

The most effective leadership development plans - those that set you up for success (actual behavioral change) – generally incorporate the following features:

1. You have chosen to develop, enhance and/or more effectively use a skill/competency that will clearly assist you in making a greater contribution to those around you and/or to the goals of the organization.
2. You can envision yourself utilizing this skill or competency in the future.
3. While you may have some trepidation (change is uncomfortable sometimes), you are excited about the impact you can have once these changes are in place.
4. You have a very specific plan to follow, usually one that incorporates both *external* change as well as *internal* change.

Someone - your boss, a coach or a work colleague – is holding you accountable for on-going follow through and consistency of focus. And this person is available to help you see opportunities to improve beyond what you see in a given moment.

So, as an example, one to which we can all relate:

After receiving results from a 360 assessment, feedback from a colleague or simply through self-reflection, you determine you would like to improve your effectiveness by *listening* better and more often to your colleagues, especially your direct reports. You know that listening more often and deeply to your direct reports will create more trust and understanding and will help to further their development. In addition, you believe that more proactive listening on your part with your peers will go a long way to alleviating tension between you when you disagree about important business issues. So, you choose “listening” as a skill to further develop, enhance or employ.

Most people are sincere when they say “I’m going to try to listen more to my colleagues.” And they generally do so for a few weeks until life intrudes and other business takes over; their great intentions for change fade into the background. Without a very specific plan that helps them create new breakthroughs and new habits, most people then believe they have made those changes either because they tried a few new things and/or because it was top of mind for a few weeks. Generally, that is not enough to effect meaningful and lasting change.

What's needed at this point is a detailed plan that sets you up for success, one that can do three things for you:

1. Keep your development "top of mind."
2. Create conditions for success – to change the environment around you to support the new desirable behaviors and to provide you feedback.
3. Initiate a new "practice" that will lead you to embracing new and more effective behaviors. Research proves it is much easier to "start a new habit" than to stop a bad habit.

For our "listening" example, here are a few ideas one might adopt in changing *external* circumstances to support more effective listening and/or to gain more skill. These external changes create conditions for success:

- Establish regular direct report meetings where the agenda is in the hands of the employee and you state it is your time to listen to them.
- Establish a few hours a week of "open door" policy where you are available to listen.
- Set up brown bag lunches with no agenda except to hear what's on employees' minds.
- Interview your colleagues about how you tend to listen – when/how you tend to be great and when/how you are not.
- Ask colleagues to provide you a "signal" when you are not listening well.
- Establish skip level meetings.
- Read a book, take a quiz, or take a class on "listening skills."

The above suggestions are very useful, but they do not represent *internal* change, which generally is also required. Internal change is the *actual behavioral change* we make in any given moment. It's where we stop in the middle of a "lecture" and ask a question. Or, stop in the middle of a debate to seek more understanding of the other's perspective. When listening to someone's explanation, we ask even more probing questions than normal. It may be when we listen with our "hearts" to appreciate another's feelings.

To support our *internal changes*, it is useful for us to create and commit to some daily/weekly “practices” that will keep these top of mind and help us create new and more effective habits. The practices should be measurable – either you did it or not. Here are some examples:

- When listening to a colleague’s story about a situation, ask 2-3 predetermined questions before launching into a response. Examples - “What else should I know about this situation?” or “What are your best solutions?” or “What role do you want me to play?”
- Adopt the attitude of *listen* first, *solve* the problem second and bring it to each meeting of the day.
- Take a few minutes each day to look at your calendar and plan when and how you can “listen” better that day.
- Adopt “active listening” cues – eye contact, single focus of attention (no multi-tasking on the computer), your mouth is closed when others are speaking, ask for clarification, etc. and practice them in regularly scheduled meetings.
- When in tense dialog ask a question like “Help me better understand this from your point of view.”
- Before responding, make a habit of saying “Let me make sure I’m hearing you accurately.” Then restate the other’s position.
- Practice switching *modes* of listening from “critical” - listening for what’s wrong or missing or how you will respond to “connecting” – listening to understand/appreciate the feelings underneath the words.

In essence, go to the other extreme – for a period of time, listen better than anyone else around you. Increase your listening impact in each and every situation. Become a student of “listening” well. Ask others what they do to listen well. Observe those who are great listeners. Immerse yourself in the question “What does it take to listen well?” Notice (with compassion and forgiveness) when others are not listening well. Ask them for a moment to be heard. Recognize the impact to others when we utilize great listening skills for problem solving and relationship building. Envision yourself as a great listener.

What leadership competency *in you* is longing to be developed?