

The characteristics of High Performing Leaders

The phenomenon of leadership has been the subject of extensive research over the last several decades. Two basic dimensions have been identified, relationship-oriented behaviour, and task-oriented behaviour. The former dimension, pertaining to more equity and human relations has been the focus of behavioural science research far more often than task behaviour or specification of performance standards. The managerial importance of directing effort in appropriate directions has been quite overlooked until recent times.

High performing managers, people who in successive positions had attained outstanding levels of performance have a number of things in common. One key factor was a common pattern in the way these executives settled into their jobs -- in determining and communicating feasible objectives during the so-called "first 90 days".

How They Did It

The first thirty days were characterized by open discussions with members of the department, by actively listening to various points of view of problems and opportunities. During this period the high performing leaders were sizing up the situation and implicitly building relationships with executives and staff.

The next sixty days were marked by discussions to test out alternative objectives and plans, assessing feasibility, obstacles and support. The ninety days usually ended with a radical change in behaviour, from listening to directing. The direction to employees came in the form of a thank you for input and assistance followed by a statement of the objectives for the organization during the next performance period. From that point on, the achievement of the goal, with a gradual opening up of relationships as time and goal achievement went on.

High Performing Leaders -- Their Characteristics

High performing leaders are goal-oriented with an ability to size up the performance possibilities in a situation, and to communicate a sense of direction. They have a common ability to manage attention through vision (objectives) and to communicate that vision in meaningful ways.

Jack Welch, Chairman of General Electric is a prime example of a leader who successfully manages through the effective use of vision. His vision as quoted in GE's annual report is "To be number one or number two *in any business* we are in and to take quantum leaps ahead of our competitors in technology". He subsequently directed that GE's management development effort be focused on *LEADERSHIP* and created the "work out" program to reorganize and refocus the efforts of GE management.

Fortunately, the high performing leaders of this world have left their mark. By studying how they tackle each new assignment you can learn to do what they do. The pay off? Well, the pay off for you is success and with success comes confidence and an increase in self-esteem. Better get at it now than to stumble just as you're getting going.

Behaviour Skills of the High Performing Leader

The **traditional**, rational leader sets goals and objectives and manages against them. Policy, rules, order and professional management skills are the concerns of this kind of leader. This style works well in stable situations.

The TRANSFORMATIONAL leader is able to set goals and objectives, but thrives on doing so in a period of active change. Innovation, risk-taking and problem-solving are the skills that a good transformational leader exhibits.

High Performing Leaders

Are conventional risk takers.

- They approach each situation from an untraditional viewpoint and give signals that they are different.
- They have an ability to bring focus to situations, set an agenda for action and send signals that "I know the pathway and I'll take you there".
- They use emotion to inspire confidence.
- They use inspiration or symbolic management practices "We will be the leaders in our industry". "We will be number one".
- They have learned to use images in public speaking.
- They know the importance of putting on events that can get employees excited about doing something.
- They have a remarkable ability to match the needs of the organization by carefully sizing up the situation and taking bold steps to improve things.
- They personally show a high positive regard for themselves and almost never worry about the downside.

How High Performing Leaders Get Started

Step One -- Sizing up the Situation

Start out by remembering that your job is *not* to take personal responsibility for problems that your direct reports will bring to you. Remember that your job is to support your people and hold them accountable for results! Hold on to that thought with all your might!

Step Two -- Getting to Know the Organization

Step two involves getting to know the people you manage. What better way than to sit down with them and ask these key questions:

1. Tell me what you do for this organization. What are the results of your efforts.
2. Tell me about the obstacles you face in trying to accomplish your responsibilities.
3. Describe for me the ideal state in your mind. That is, if all was going really well, what would you say?

Notice here that you avoid the trap of being perceived as the most knowledgeable person. Your intention at this point is to *LISTEN* to everyone's point of view. We are an over-verbalized society. To be successful everyone thinks they must talk, to "tell and sell". But in your case, you want to *listen* and *learn*. The people that work for you will appreciate the opportunity to be listened to. They inevitably want to be heard and, in fact, will have a wealth of insight into how the organization *really* works.

Subtly, but surely you will begin to get to know your staff -- their knowledge, their hopes, their fears and their dreams. That's called *BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS* and is just as important as gathering information.

As they begin to open up, their level of trust will increase and more and more information will come tumbling out. At the same time, you will be able to gather a sense of the issues and challenges facing you. You can then begin the next step.

[NOTE. Talk to everyone you can. Peers, subordinates, your boss, anyone who comes in contact, is serviced by or gives service to your operation].

Step Three -- SITNA Alternative

You'll hear about every problem large and small. Your challenge is to "reframe" those problems in terms of the SITNA alternative (**Situations That Need Attention**). You can focus on what you are concerned about, then engage in *action planning*, with participative management. The process can turn you into a facilitator of the procedures by which your subordinates and others participate in developing plans to improve situations that are or may jeopardize goal attainment.

Step Four -- Developing Your Vision

Patience in situational analysis is a virtue. But virtue must be translated into action. Therefore, the next step is to decide for yourself what you want to happen. Dream a little bit, allow yourself to speculate on the best outcome for the situation. Then translate that dream into your personal *vision*.

Your *vision* is simply a short statement of what you want. It comes after listening and gathering information and identifying the situations that need attention.

The Shift

Now comes the time to shift your behaviour from listening to acting and more importantly *directing* the behaviour of others. It goes something like this:

"I have listened to what everyone has told me. I have sifted it all out with your help and here's what we are going to do."

Then take your *vision* and translate it into goals for the organization. If you want to be the best, articulate what you mean by best. If you want to raise standards then articulate the new standards.

From this moment on your personal goal becomes one of focusing attention on the goal or goals you have articulated.

Structure every situation based on those goals.

Develop ways of tracking and measuring movement toward goal achievement.