

Creating Team Leaders: The Challenge of Leading in a Democratic Manner

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How do you turn your traditional autocratic supervisor into an empowering team leader? Encouraging leaders to move from autocratic to democratic leadership styles is the key to creating empowerment.

Supervisors are thought to resist empowerment and to cling to autocratic behaviors because they fear loss of influence, loss of a familiar career path, and they have doubts that an empowered team will really work. The first steps to overcoming these fears are creating conditions which will help your leaders shift from autocratic to democratic behaviors. Four conditions must be created and supported:

1. Opportunity for reflection. There must be an opportunity for supervisors to reflect on the structure of their organization, their role as a leader, and the knowledge which has been collected over many decades on leadership styles.
2. Time and a place for skill building. There must be a time for building skills which are essential to democratic leadership. People need a safe place to practice using new behaviors skills. They need time to see for themselves that they can achieve more through democratic behaviors.
3. A plan for change. There must be a specific plan for change which prevents comfortable autocrats from avoiding the reflective thinking and skill building process.
4. Someone assigned to help. There should be a coach to observe and follow up on the change process with each supervisor.

Reflecting on leadership roles

Most supervisors are aware of every day problems—warning signs—that indicate autocratic leadership works poorly. However, the warnings usually are filtered out because they do not fit accepted beliefs about how a supervisor should behave. These beliefs, after all, were acquired over time, reinforced, and nurtured.

Help them to “picture” the organization... The process of learning a new role begins by thinking reflectively to challenge established beliefs about what constitutes effective leadership. Reflective thinking can be encouraged by asking supervisors to draw a picture of what their organization looks like. In this non-threatening exercise, people allow their unfiltered observations to slip out and are often surprised at the pictures they create:

One group of supervisors who used this process, pictured:

>Employees as a column of ants marching along toward a hill...

>Supervisors as a cloud raining on the column of ants.

Another group of supervisor drew a picture of employees running for their lives from a tornado labeled upper management.

A group of people in an empowered team doing this same exercise drew their team as people in a boat rescuing their customers in the water around them.

The point of this exercise is to allow the images which people have about their organization to come out in a new way. This gives people an opportunity to reflect on their beliefs about their organization which might not otherwise be openly discussed.

A time and place for skill building

Supervisors often learn a great deal from taking part in a role playing exercise which allows them to experience the problems associated with working under autocratic leadership. Many organizations use role plays which require supervisors to work together to make some product such as a paper airplane or a frisbee from a paper plate. Comparing their productivity

under autocratic leadership (which controls information and discourages creativity) to their productivity in an empowered setting allows supervisors to discover for themselves the disadvantages and advantages associated with each style of leadership. Self-discovery provides a much more profound experience than hearing about it in a lecture or videotape, or simply reading about it.

Take time for a bit of history and theory---

After supervisors have had a chance to do some self-discovery and reflect on how their behavior restricts the productivity of their organization, it's time for just a bit of theory.

Many people are surprised to learn that Kurt Lewin proposed a model for democratic leadership in 1945. The four styles of leadership identified by Bradford and Lippitt in 1945 are also very current for the 21st century.

Many people are also surprised to learn that Tannenbaum and Schmidt published their continuum of leadership styles in the 1950s. There have been extensive studies about significant increases in productivity due to empowerment during both World Wars, along with the Harwood studies, and Likert's research published in 1961.

Giving supervisors a model for describing the various styles of leadership helps tremendously.

HARD-BOILED	BENEVOLENT	RELUCTANT	CONSULTATIVE	PARTICIPATIVE
AUTOCRAT	AUTOCRAT	AUTOCRAT	LEADER	LEADER

All of this research data leads supervisors to an embarrassing question. If we've known about the benefits of democratic leadership and empowered teams for six decades, why have we done so little to implement these ideas? This profound question clears the way for many to the next step.

Learning new skills—When autocratic leaders have had the opportunity to reflect on their situation and consider some evidence to realign their thinking, they are ripe for acquiring new democratic behaviors. Learning new behaviors requires careful preparation in a somewhat structured learning environment.

What behaviors constitute those needed for democratic leadership? A review of several surveys and case studies offers the following skills which supervisors need to master in order to practice democratic leadership:

- >The ability to lead participative meetings....
- >Listening skills...
- >The ability to handle conflict...
- >The knowledge for establishing measures...
- >Group centered decision making skills...
- >Teaching skills
- >Teambuilding skills.

Leading Participative Meetings... Democratic leaders need to gather the team together for regular meetings to study data, make decisions, identify problems, make plans, and learn about business issues.

It's the team leader's responsibility to assure that an agenda is developed and that the team focuses some time on its performance measures. The team leader tracks issues from the last meeting for follow up and highlights urgent issues for immediate resolution. The team leader assures that once a decision is reached someone accepts responsibility for implementation.

Team leaders make sure there is a regular time for the meeting and minimize interruptions. The team leader assures that there are tools, such as flip charts, and works on achieving 100% attendance at that meeting. Responsibility for running the meeting might rotate from person to person.

Learning to listen better... Effective leaders have strong listening skills in order to understand situations, improve cooperation, and encourage people to take responsibility. "Active listening," as defined by Carl Rogers, causes the listener to try to grasp the facts and feelings back to the speaker to assure that correct communication has occurred.

The goal of listening is to be able to respond to the speaker's need's, not our own. We should keep listening even when the speaker's ideas and actions are different from our own. A good listener will respond with empathy, withhold judgement, listen with the eyes, and squint with the ears.

Supervisors need an opportunity to practice active listening by working in small groups to practice reflecting the facts and feelings being shared by others. They need to practice responding to people's feelings about issues, noting all the cues, and testing for understanding.

Managing conflict... Supervisors need an opportunity to learn a bit of conflict theory and learn about their own style of handling conflict. There are several excellent conflict style instruments available to help people learn how they typically deal with conflict. This self-awareness allows people to perform better in conflict situations which normally arise in an organization.

Autocratic behavior may have been an effective way for supervisors to avoid conflict with their employees. When employees are conditioned to be submissive some conflict will be avoided. On the other hand, autocracy creates resentment and leads to smoldering resistance and conflict over control.

Democratic leaders come to understand that conflict is a normal part of any team effort. Each individual has a different type of personality, different knowledge, and different experiences. It is perfectly normal for people to be in conflict. Democratic leadership allows conflicts over issues and personalities to be resolved instead of denied. Conflict over control tends to disappear.

Establishing measures... Working without appropriate and effective performance measures is like driving a car without a speedometer or a gas gauge. It's no wonder that organizations sometimes get into trouble when performance measures are absent, ineffective or inappropriate.

A democratic leader will involve the people in the team in identifying what activities should be measured by the team.

Establishing a good set of measures is like pitching a pup tent. There are two sides to be staked down. One side consists of the measures that are important to the customer. The other side involves measures that are important to the team. A team needs a few key measures to indicate how internal performance is going and a few to illustrate the customer's point of view.

Of course performance indicators need to be posted in a place where everyone on the team can see them and indicators should be one of the topics in the regular team meeting. Having indicators which people cannot see is like putting the speedometer in the back seat.

Group Decision Making... While it is certainly easier for one person to make some decisions, the quality of the decision making is often improved by involving the team. Implementation of decisions is almost always easier if everyone has an opportunity to share in the decision making. It's a basic truism that those who create tend to support.

Democratic leaders also need to know how to guide the team in rational decision making:

>Objectives to be accomplished by the decision should be agreed upon by everyone before considering alternatives.

>Even when a decision is made, the whole group should pause to identify the things that could go wrong with the decision.

In some cases team leaders will need to know how to lead a team in brainstorming and then in some form of voting. Some teams use colored dots which are placed beside brainstorming ideas. Others use a method for voting by placing weighted scores by ideas as in nominal group technique. There are many methods that work. The new democratic leader needs to know at least one of them.

In general, group decision making should be done on a consensus basis which means that all team members can live with at least 70 percent of what is agreed upon at any time. Teams want to avoid enacting decisions that give individual members significant heartburn.

*Teaching skills...*Democratic leaders do not need the teaching skills associated with non-participative learning. There is no need for lecturing or pouring knowledge into someone's head. Instead, democratic leaders need to awaken to the realization that we are all learning every day.

When a team decides to improve a situation, it embarks on what Juran called the diagnostic journey, which is a learning process. The famed Deming (or Shewhart) Cycle was advanced by the educator, John Dewey over 70 years ago as a fundamental approach to learning about the world around us.

Educators call it action research because it involves the learner in taking actions in the world in which the learner lives. The teaching skills for action research are skills related to facilitating group learning. These skills include the ability to pose questions in a manner which encourages creative thinking, the ability to encourage dialogue, and the knack for synthesizing ideas.

Democratic leaders quickly appreciate the strong link between education and democracy. All learning influences the potential realities of our environment, and the political environment influences all learning. Therefore, a knowledgeable work force is ready to be empowered and needs empowerment to remain vital. A work force without knowledge needs education before empowerment. Of course the best way to prevent empowerment is to deny people access to school, literacy, and information which can set them free.

Creating an implementation plan

If you want to democratize a workplace, it helps to gain the consent of the people you are about to liberate. This is often a slow process, since an endulled workforce is often comfortable with its situation, even if the company is going out of business.

Democratization is not something management does to people—It is a process in which people have to participate in defining and creating their own liberation. When people are not ready to accept the responsibility of becoming empowered, then there must be an educational process to set the stage for change.

When the climate is right for change, it is ideal to involve people in planning the change process. A plan is important because in spite of everyone's best efforts, there will be some leaders who want to hold onto their comfortable autocratic behaviors.

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