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True leadership demands mutual respect between boss and employees

By Ed Brenegar

REAL LIFE LEADERSHIP

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Question: I've worked for all kinds of bosses. Some of them ignored me, and some treated me like dirt. My current boss is a really nice person, and I enjoy working for her. Why can't more bosses be like her?

Answer: The people we work for, whom we call our bosses, are in a difficult position. They are squeezed between the expectations of the people who work for them and the realities of the marketplace. Success is not as simple as a bottom-line financial figure. It's not like a ball game where the game ends and a winner is declared. No, the pressure on leaders of organizations remains high, intense and unrelenting. It is one of the unspoken realities of leadership.

Leaders, however, have a choice. They can choose to position themselves so that they experience less stress and still sustain a high level of performance.

This is a simple idea that works against every natural inclination we have. When the pressure builds, our natural tendency is to grasp for control, reduce variables and try to survive. Micromanagement accelerates the crisis by excluding the most valuable resource — people.

The better choice is to share the responsibility for leadership.

William Kelley, director of training and development of human capital for the Grove Park Inn Resort and Spa, understands what this means. Kelley came to GPI two decades ago as a safety director and rose to the No. 2 position in the company by learning to share leadership. He operates by a simple yet profound principle: "Leadership is about the people — being responsible to them and not for them."

For Kelley, this means leaders have a responsibility to develop leadership in the people who work for them. From this perspective, authority and responsibility for the job remain with the employee. When the boss takes authority away from the person who is responsible for the job, conflict arises and performance drops. When leaders are responsible to their employees, as Kelley says, the relationship is based on mutual respect between the leader and the employee.

Kelley recently told me that he sees leadership as "the spirit of humbleness." Humility is expressed in respect for the employee: "Good people make great employees." He continued, "We hire people for what they have done and let them go for who they are. We can train the mechanics of any job, but we cannot teach happiness, honesty, good judgment, responsibility, loyalty and diligence." In other words, mutual respect leads to shared leadership.

For Kelley, this relationship of respect is guided by three principles: First, communicating without fear to employees is more effective than being a boss who is controlling. Second, learning in the workplace involves peoples' feelings; reward the effort and performance will grow. And third, discipline is an opportunity to teach to produce leadership.

Leadership begins with mutual respect between the boss and the employee. The outcome is shared leadership that produces successful results.

This is the opinion of Ed Brenegar. He is president of the Community of Leadership, a leadership development and transition-planning consultancy. He writes the Leading Questions blog at <http://edbrenegar.typepad.com>. Send questions to him at ed@edbrenegar.com.

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