

## business issues

# LEADERS: KNOW THYSELF— AND YOUR EMPLOYEES

BY MAGI GRAZIANO

Modern leadership still involves plenty of talking, but there's an increasing emphasis on listening—not only to others but also to oneself.

**BEING AN EFFECTIVE LEADER** has become more complicated in the 21st century.

In the previous century, for the vast majority, work was approached as a means of survival. The level of employee engagement did not dictate how long they stayed in the role.

But it's different today. People are always on the lookout for more stimulating and rewarding work, as well as inspiring work environments where they can make a difference and grow themselves and their careers.

Leaders now face these and other unprecedented challenges. Today's leaders must not only understand their competitors when it comes to customers, but also when it comes to their talents. They must be able to lead three completely different generations of

people (baby boomers, generation X and millennials), all with different operating contexts and outlooks on what work is all about. They must have well-honed human awareness acumen and call on it moment-by-moment to inspire, enroll and engage their employees. These leaders must understand the systemic impacts of their company climate and be willing to look deeper to understand cultural norms that are impeding agility and innovation. They must have the finesse to weave day-to-day tasks into the big picture and inspire their people to give it their all for the sake of the mission. Today's leaders need to understand people at their core like never before.

Global workforce surveys report that highly qualified, motivated people chose to work for companies that build a strong, inspiring culture and that monitor and address both workplace culture and climate issues as they arise. If recruitment and retention of highly qualified, motivated people is one your organization's initiatives, leadership intelligence ought to be another. They go hand in hand.

*Leadership intelligence* relies on your ability to grow, learn and master new ways to lead people, and there are three tenets to consider when boosting it: self-awareness, executive brain function and response agility.

### Self-Awareness

*Self-awareness* begins with the curiosity and courage to hear what does and doesn't work about your leadership *and* the culture that exists in the organization. Once you become aware of your competitive talent advantages and your talent barriers from the eyes of your people, you are equipped to take powerful action. Self-awareness allows you to leverage your talent and intervene when and where necessary to remove those personality ticks that are in the way of your true leadership potential.

Culture and climate awareness opens the door for you to see what is really going on and intervene in the cultural norms and barriers that are in the way of employee engagement, innovation and synchronicity. When you are curious and courageous,

you begin to ask the tough questions and hear the tough answers. When you do this, you begin to see what "blind spots" may be hidden from your view, and you learn what you do that sabotages or impedes your leadership effectiveness.

Self-awareness is the doorway to emotional intelligence, and it gives you access to real improvement as well as personal and professional development. But it's not always easy. In almost

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every case with every human being, there are personality or behavioral aspects that have a negative impact on others, and with an authentic look in the mirror an aware leader can begin to take responsibility for those negative impacts. But just being aware of our negative behaviors is, alone, insufficient. Taking responsibility for the impact of those behaviors, asking for forgiveness and working to shift away from those limiting ways of being is where leadership intelligence begins. Once leaders have mastered self-awareness, they optimize their ability to leverage situational awareness—which is fundamental to assessing, evaluating and intervening, if need be, in the ebbs and flows of the climate and culture of their organizations.

### **Executive Brain Function**

Optimizing your *executive brain function* is the secret weapon of leadership intelligence. Doing so is a whole other article, but here are the basics of the concept. The prefrontal cortex is where the executive brain operates; think of the controls in an airplane cockpit. This is the part of our brain where strategic thinking, collaboration, reasoning and creativity come from. The problem is that most leaders learn over time to depend and lean on one hemisphere, and they become complacent in allowing that hemisphere to run the show. This limits the airplane's ability to navigate through storms and soar to new heights.

The left hemisphere of our brain is where our organization, categorizing, reasoning and strategizing come from. It is in the right hemisphere where brainstorming, innovation, collaboration and relationship abilities are housed. When a leader is aware of their goals and visions as well as in control (conscious) of their thoughts, responses and well-being—and the leader leverages both hemispheres of their executive brain through right-left hemisphere integration—their leadership intelligence and effectiveness skyrockets. When a leader is using all of their capacities, they see things they might not otherwise see and are more equipped to respond to climate and cultural barriers and infringements.

### **Response Agility**

*Response agility* is the ability to respond in an appropriate, controlled manner—regardless of the current stress or breakdown you are facing. Being agile with response and reaction is key to effective leadership. Anger and frustration might be needed at times, and curiosity and collaboration may be needed at other times. Flat-line reaction is not appropriate for all situations, and screaming and yelling is not appropriate for *any* situation.

Agility in your response means that you have trained yourself to think before reacting. Effective leaders ask themselves, “What is needed now?” This has everything to do with situational awareness and appropriate reaction. When stuff hits the fan at work, a leader who has a handle on how they respond and can coach others in this manner is one who is positively contributing to a healthy company climate and culture. Response agility takes discipline, awareness, new habit formation and commitment.

### **An Inspired Mission**

Being a mission-driven leader who inspires people to give their best in service of a compelling vision is a key element of today's most successful leaders. They know that most people they hire are not coming to work simply for a paycheck. Rather, these leaders have a keen awareness that many of the people they hire are coming to work to fulfill their individual purpose in a way that supports the organizational purpose. Today's highly effective leaders understand how to inspire *esprit de corps* and leverage their communication with others to do so. They use their people skills to tie work responsibilities and tasks to the overall intent and strategy of the business. Lastly, these leaders understand the difference between climate and culture and have the aptitude to know how and when to alter both.

Learning the fundamentals of how people operate and how to inspire them is the easy part. Mastering those skills *is* leadership intelligence. Turning your leadership intelligence into your competitive talent advantage is the number one way to impact recruitment and retention of the best people. ■