

Leadership: Getting and Giving the Call for Action



Introduction

In working with many different companies in all types of industries during the past year or so, I believe I've noticed some new trends among the work force. We all know that career-long loyalty to any one company had been a fading ideal for many years now – mostly due to the new reality of global mergers of companies, buy-outs, restructuring and doing more with less. Today's employees don't hire on expecting to be with a company their entire career. Most don't want to. That doesn't mean they aren't loyal – they can be and usually are extremely loyal to each company for which they work. However, human resource data indicates that the highest turn-over rate is for employees with between two and five years with the company. In fact, multiple studies, such as those seen on blog.forbes.com have shown that for professionals between the ages of 20 – 30, approximately 84% plan to leave their current position in the next five years.

Another trend I've noticed lately is that companies are becoming much savvier in the difference between a true "High Performer" and someone who does a great job – which is "Expected". Not showing up late, getting all your work done, contributing new ideas to the team and not making any major errors is no longer enough. Unfortunately, in today's economy, just doing a great job can mean you're on the bottom when a reduction-in-force (RIF) occurs. What most companies are looking for today in high performers include someone who:

- Gets results now
- Influences others both up and down the chain of command
- Displays leadership with all types of teams
- Seeks continuous learning
- Demonstrates extremely high functional competency

It also used to seem that it wasn't as much "what" you knew that would get you hired and keep you employed as "who" you knew. That also appears to be changing. From my experience in the last few years, any manager who operates strictly from the 'buddy' system is just as likely to find him or herself on the block as well as the employees they promote. In today's market it seems to be neither what you know nor who you know, but "how well do you know" whom you know. This means you have to cultivate relationships with a network of people you can call on when the need arises. The ability to cultivate that network and use it successfully will depend upon building and maintaining your credibility.

So, what can you do to build credibility? How can you get noticed (in a good way)? What does it take to stand out above the crowd? I've recently done some informal research using well-respected managers and employees in different industries, and, based on my research, this presentation will discuss some ideas that might make you indispensable to the company you wish to stay with, or get you a glowing recommendation should you decide to leave.

The View from the Top

Let's start with the view from the top. I interviewed 19 leaders, 12 male and 7 female, including corporate vice presidents down to senior directors. Eleven of them had switched industry type at least once. The first question was, "When you walk into a room full of employees to give direction, what feedback do you want and what feedback do you receive?"

Their comments were as follows:

1. Intelligent questions – no fluff: We know when you're just speaking up to get noticed. Don't waste my time on frivolous questions. No one likes a suck-up and if you don't watch your step, I'll be convinced you are one.
2. Take notes – I hate having to repeat myself: Write down what I need and ask for priorities and/or clarification. If you miss a deliverable it won't look good for you.
3. Make sure you're the RIGHT volunteer: If you're not right for the job, don't offer. I'd rather you offer to assist the right person than fail me. If you're the right person, say so – quickly. Be a first responder!
4. Look like someone I want working for me: Wrinkled clothes and jeans with holes in them may be all the rage today, but when I want someone to represent me, they won't be dressed that way.
5. Body language – pay attention: Look me in the eye – and leave your Blackberry alone!
6. Realism: If you take an action, don't force me to set your completion date. Mine will probably be unrealistic, but if you agree – I expect you to hold to it.

A couple more comments from the leaders about action items:

- If you take an action, Git-R-Done. You may need to break it down into segments or milestones – fine. Just keep me informed and make your deadlines.
- It's not for you. Make sure it's complete to my standards. If you know I like detail, then give me detail. If you know I'm all about the bottom line, make sure to let me know the financial impacts.
- Keep your commitment – both time and budget. If something is going wrong, don't wait until it's too late to salvage it before I know about it.
- Be careful taking on too much. Just like you, I'm always overloaded, so when you ask if there is anything else you can do – be careful. You may really be asking for further direction regarding your action item and end up with a whole new action. It doesn't look good if you ask me for more work, then whine about how busy you are.

My next question to the leader's group was, "How does that advice change if you are receiving the information?" Their feedback included:

1. Know who I am: Different personality types like to receive information differently.

In order to clarify those remarks, let's briefly look at the Wilson Social Styles (WSS). WSS recognizes four major personality types; Directors, Analyticals, Expressives and Amiables.
 - Drivers are typically strong-willed, impatient, focused on the outcome, easily bored and getting the job done means more than personal relationships. To communicate with a Driver, get to the point and be specific, provide options, and don't provide the detail unless asked.
 - Analyticals are typically all about the detail – in fact; analysis paralysis was invented to describe what can happen with Analyticals. They may be perceived as aloof or stuffy, but need the structure to solve

- problems. To communicate with an Analytical be very organized and logical, provide the detail, stick to the facts and avoid surprises.
- Most Expressives are highly competitive, imaginative, and eager to please, but lack concern for detail. To communicate with an Expressive, make your presentation stimulating and interesting, avoid arguing, and let them do most of the talking.
 - Typical Amiables, on the other hand, are rarely competitive, they seem casual, concerned about the feeling of others, and seek warm, long-lasting relationships. To communicate with an Amiable, take time to show interest in them personally, be cooperative not pushy, and explain how your outcomes will impact the people in the organization.
 - So, what the leaders seem to be saying is that you need to take the time to learn something about them before the meeting, and be sure to speak their language. The chart below shows some important information about those styles to help you be more successful in dealing their personalities.

	Analyticals	Amiable	Driver	Expressive
Primary Asset	Systematic	Supportive	Focused	Energizing
Back-up Behavior	Avoid	Acquiesce	Autocratic	Attack
For growth, needs to	Decide	Initiate	Listen	Check
Strongest personal motivator	Respect	Approval	Results	Recognition
Needs climate that	Describes	Supports	Commits	Collaborates
Let them save	Face	Relationships	Time	Effort
Make effort to be	Accurate	Agreeable	Efficient	Stimulating
Support their	Principles & thinking	Relationship and feelings	Conclusions and actions	Visions and intuitions
Stress benefits that answer	HOW problem is solved	WHY solution is best	WHAT solution will do	WHO else has used
For decisions give them	Data and evidence	Assurances and guarantees	Options and possibilities	Testimony and incentives
Follow up with	Service	Support	Actions	Incentives

To get back to our interview concerning leaders receiving information, the next comment was:

2. Don't waste my time: Be prepared. We can usually tell if you've done your homework or not. If you are trying to bluff, and especially if I happen to be an Analytical and need detail, you'll go down in flames.

Another time waster is telling me how something can't be done. I've entrusted the action to you – make it happen! Don't spend one second in a meeting with me making excuses for why it can't be done - give me options. If it truly is impossible the way we laid it out, tell me how my action needs to be changed and what results you can then provide.

These seem to be some clear directions from the leaders' perspective, but what about you as the employee? Are there some lessons learned to be shared regarding answering the boss' call to action?

The View from the Trenches

That led to another round of interviews. Twenty-six employees, known as “natural leaders” in their organization were polled on the best (and worst) ways to get noticed. The first question asked was, “What are the attributes that you feel are correlated to being noticed as a high contributor? The following includes their comments:

1. Listen carefully: Make sure you show them that you’re listening. If you want to be noticed you need eye contact and body language that shows it. It’s called “active” listening.
2. Be a First Responder: If the action item is within your area of expertise, speak up at once. Show enthusiasm for solving the problem. Make sure you’re clear on the expectations. Don’t take on actions that are not within your expertise. You’ll very likely fail, or at least struggle, and your peers will be happy to help you fail.
3. Do your homework: Make sure you understand the action completely. Talk to anyone available that has information on how to solve it, what the barriers are, and what’s been tried in similar situations.
4. Make the Boss look good: You are a reflection of your boss, and that means if you don't look good, your boss doesn't look good. We’re not talking about a dress code here. Every time you send out an email, on answer the phone, or give a presentation you get a chance to represent your Boss. Doing it right will enhance not only the Boss’ reputation, but also your own.
5. Talk the talk: See the section on Wilson Social Styles. Not only are you more successful if you can speak their personality language, but you also create a connection that will serve you well in the future.
6. Make it happen: You took the action item on, make sure you complete it successfully! Nothing less than your best effort is required. Use your influence on others to get them to help you – then be sure to give them some of the credit.
7. Remember the bottom line: Every leader is always focused on the bottom line. Remember to report on how your action is impacting the bottom line. You need to learn to speak their language, the language of finance.

The next question was, “Are there any things that you’ve seen or done that did not work so well?” Of course, no one ever admitted to doing any of these themselves, but reported that they had seen others do them.

- Bluffing: It doesn’t work. It might work for you once or twice, but it won’t be long before you’ve got a reputation for it.
- Relying too much on others: You took on the action item, you need to finish it. Just remember, those people whose data/actions you are relying on also want to be noticed. Why should they make you successful?
- Not meeting commitments: This is not going to make you shine.
- Trying to do it all: As we said above, don’t take it on if it’s not in your area of expertise. Do take on those that make sense for you.

- If you don't want to do it, don't volunteer: There is, however, a possible detriment to this one. If everyone knows you should have volunteered and you didn't, they'll probably make sure the boss knows that also.
- Don't hide the bad: Stuff happens. If you can control it, alleviate it, or fix it, it's just a note on your report. If it is something that you can't resolve by yourself, don't put off reporting it. It will only get worse.

Common Themes

So, there seems to be some common themes between both giving and receiving direction.

1. Know the personality of the boss
2. Be a first responder
3. No bluffing
4. Keep your commitments – be accountable
5. Don't hide the bad

This is all great advice, but what happens when you fail? You've done all of the right things to get noticed for outstanding performance, but due to those pesky "circumstances beyond your control" the action/project is not completed on time and/or on budget. What then? Regardless of the level of the interviewee, the responses were very similar.

1. Take responsibility: It's your action. Even if Joe or Susan were the ones that messed it all up, you need to be accountable. The buck stops with you. No whining! One vice president said, "The least favorite person in an organization is the one who takes the credit when things go right, but passes the buck for blame when they don't." Tell the boss:
 - a. What went wrong
 - b. How it's going to be fixed
 - c. When it's going to be fixed
 - d. What you've done to keep it from ever happening again.

Conclusion

Based on the research I've cited, what seems to make one employee stand out above any other is the willingness and enthusiasm for helping the boss solve his/her problems, doing that problem solving in a structured, accountable manner and understanding how to communicate in a way the boss needs.

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