
From Super-worker to Super-visor

In today's global business environment, the best-laid plans, greatest technology, and best equipment will produce average results, or worse, unless they are organized and utilized by a skilled and proficient leader. You must be able to inspire people to follow your lead. No matter how technically capable you are, you won't be effective as a leader



unless you gain the *willing* cooperation of others. You must become your team's coach, captain, quarterback, cheerleader, and biggest fan... all rolled into one! YOU are the critical lynch-pin between your organization's goals and your people. Everyone is depending on you and your team to accomplish the agreed upon goals.

It wasn't always this way. An American mechanical engineer, Fredrick W. Taylor (1856-1815) sought to improve industrial efficiency and created a set of principles which came to be known as *scientific management*. The basic assumption was that to gain maximum productivities from workers, all that had to be done was to scientifically break down the required tasks into the smallest possible units. Then the units were assigned to each worker by definitive task with a definitive time allocation and a definitive manner for getting the task done. Of course all these definitions were created and mandated by the boss. Good workers, so it was assumed, had strong backs and weak minds.

If you study modern *supervisory* texts, you'll find that some of the same techniques that came out of Scientific Management theory are still advocated as being essential for good management. Certainly there is nothing inherently bad about written instruction cards, scheduling systems, job descriptions, or time and motion studies. But, by the mid-1930's the basic premise was in question. Scientific Management was a good system... in



theory. Problem was it was never able to deliver the desired results. Why not? Because it was an attempt to engineer human activity without reasonable consideration for the HUMAN ELEMENT! It didn't take long to realize that motivated workers delivered better results.

Motivated employees are a result of one person, a team leader. A team leader must do much more than manage and supervise. They must earn the trust and willing cooperation of those who look to them for leadership. To be successful, a team leader must learn to use all of their strengths by recognizing, developing, and utilizing the full talents of every individual. It is a cooperative effort. *Cooperation is not about getting the other person to do what you want. Cooperation means getting the other person to do what you want because THEY WANT TO DO IT!*

Creating an organization that grows profitably relies on the minute-by-minute decisions and actions of front-line employees. The responsibility for turning your people into profitable employees falls squarely on the shoulders of your team leaders (a.k.a. supervisors, managers, superintendents, etc.). Good, professional team leaders are the true leverage point of any organization.

With a role and function of this magnitude, you would logically expect that the process of ascending to such an important position would require many years of training. Yet, in reality, most team leaders are literally promoted overnight.

Take my case for example. I started out as an airline mechanic (has it really been more than 30 years ago? Yeesh!). After a year or two of hard work (I loved that job) I was summoned to the VP of Maintenance's office and told that I had what it took. They were looking for someone to lead the line maintenance crew and I was just the guy for the job. Well of course I accepted, since it was a big promotion and included a pay raise, (a huge bump up to \$9.50 an hour if I recall). That was Friday afternoon. On Sunday we had a celebratory dinner at the in-law's, and on Monday morning I walked into the hanger to lead the same group of guys I with whom I had worked side-by-side for the last couple of years. Funny thing happened that Monday morning... I didn't recognize a single one of them... they all seemed, well... different. Each week or so for the next year I returned to the VP's office to beg him to let me go back to just doing my old job. After all, I was a great tech... one of the best... but this leading others was more than I had bargained for. Sound familiar?

On the surface it makes sense to promote a great employee who has proven that they can do the job and has an excellent personal track record of performance. To this day organizations promote the *super-worker* to being the supervisor, or team leader, literally overnight. Too bad that the qualities that make an individual a super worker are not necessarily the same qualities that make them a supervisor (team leader). American business hires for skills and fires for attitudes. The fact is, studies at Stanford Research Institute, Harvard University, and the Carnegie Foundation have proven that 85% of what it takes to be successful as a leader (at any level) has nothing to do with technical skills, knowledge, training, or education level. It has all to do with a collection of intangible characteristics and abilities we commonly identify as *leadership*.

The bad news: Traditional methods of training leaders actually makes things worse... we'll dive deeper into that phenomenon in future articles.

The good news: The characteristics of leadership are known... and leaders are, as a point of fact, not born, they are developed. The characteristics are 'learnable'... just not by traditional methods.