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Leadership Essentials

Challenging

Authentic leaders challenge themselves and others



A manager is a realist; they are managing and maintaining performance. A leader is a visionary who will challenge status quo and innovate. Managers excel in the now of process planning and execution, while leaders focus on impact, motivation and the future. The transition happens within a mindset shift. Leaders ask their teams “why” instead of “how.”

Leanne Wong (2017)

Presenting a Case

It is essential that you have understood the matter that you feel ought to be challenged. Gather as much information about it as possible. Ask questions of the relevant manager(s) or colleague. Sometimes you might feel you are asking dumb questions, that everybody understands something that you must have missed, in order to have taken such a decision. Be assured that this is rarely the case. A decision, request or behaviour may have been made or enacted without a full realisation of the consequences. On many occasions, the asking of questions will be all that's needed for realisation to dawn, and the decision, request or course of action changed.

Sometimes, particularly in the case of unethical behaviour, the realisation does in fact already exist, and the slight 'challenge' of your questions can lead to second thoughts.

However, there will be times when seeking further information and asking questions does not alter anything. Then you need to build a case to support your point of view. If possible, use your professional and social networks to discreetly find out if anybody else has faced a similar situation, whether they managed to tackle it successfully, and what they did. Then, in building a case you need to:

- understand what short term and long term favourable results the instigators think would be, or is being, achieved by carrying out the decision, request or course of action;
- if the issue for you is about ethics, set out for yourself the ways in which it is morally wrong, lacks integrity, goes against the organisation's values, or will break trust;
- be very clear in your own head about any bad business outcomes which are likely to result, or are resulting, from the decision, request or course of action.

Empathy

It is important that you adapt the presentation of your case to the needs, drivers and preoccupations of the person or people you need to persuade. Furthermore, those people must not feel as if they are 'under attack', you need to build empathy between yourself and the other person. Separate the person from the perceived problem. Focus on the problem not the person. (Goleman, 2000)

Remain calm, use open body language and maintain a relaxed eye contact. Adapt your use of language to theirs as much as you can without coming across as inauthentic. Don't use specialist words they may not be familiar with, for example.

First, if the situation allows, build or re-establish rapport. Establish that you and the person(s) you are challenging have the same overall goals – the success of the organisation, or department, for example, in whatever way that is interpreted (such as increased sales in the long term, a greater share of the market, increased consumer satisfaction.)

If you can do it subtly, 'mirror' the other person's body language. This creates feelings of empathy. Ask lots of questions, if you haven't already, to find out exactly why the person(s) whose decision/request/course of action you are challenging is supporting it; listen carefully, and be seen to be listening carefully (McCann, 2016). You may find that the person's emotions and feelings (which are underpinned by their needs and drives) play as big, if not a bigger part, as rational logic. In this case, being logical in your arguments will not be enough to persuade them. (Goleman, 2000)

For example, if the person(s) thinks this course of action will make their own job(s) more secure, talk about how this can have precisely the opposite effect. If they are ambitious, how might this affect their future career? If they need to be seen as clever, cunning or one step ahead, how might this backfire? If they want to be popular and think this is the way, talk about how this could have exactly the reverse effect. (Fisher & Ury, 2012)

When you have been through all these stages, set out the agreement you want and what action is needed next. This might sometimes simply be non-action, but this also needs to be stated.

Comfort Zones and Challenging Yourself

Challenging others in this way often feels very uncomfortable. It moves us out of our comfort zones. We might want to settle for 'a quiet life' and avoid such confrontations. We might decide, particularly when the challenge is about ethics, that it may harm our career. The latter is unlikely if you follow the steps set out in the previous section, however, in either case, not to take action can result in a loss of your integrity. This will be particularly harmful to the relationship and trust between you and your team. It might also be harmful to your own belief in yourself, and your self-confidence. So it is just as important to challenge yourself, in the face of fear (or laziness) – not just to confront others, or to have the courage to always do the right thing yourself – but to fulfil your own potential.

This does not simply refer to applying for better paid and more responsible jobs, it is also relevant to exploring the full range of what is possible within your current role. Have you got set in your ways? Are you doing things because this is always the way you've done them? Are you prepared to be open to changing your mind about something? Have you formed previous opinions on emotional rather than rational grounds? Challenging yourself is intrinsic to change, growth and even survival. Trying to push your own boundaries on a regular basis opens up your horizons. It is by thinking about this that you will gain confidence that what you're doing is right.

As suggested by Mahoney (1998), this does not mean that you must constantly take risks, but do be realistic about those risks. What do you risk losing, and what might counteract that anyway? Keep in mind what you or your team have to gain. What additional 'safety measures' can you put in place (e.g. further training? The support of a mentor or coach?). If you cannot think of ways in which you could be challenging yourself, ask a trusted colleague or your own manager, or even a good friend. (And be prepared to be surprised – they're not called 'blindspots' for nothing!)



The challenge with adhering rigidly to doing what we've always done and what makes us feel "comfortable" and secure is that, without interrupting that and taking a good long step back to examine (and shift) our habits, we can become our own worst enemies and sabotage our growth and success.'

Kathy Caprino (2019)

Challenge top tips

1

It is as important to challenge yourself as it is to challenge others

2

Always ensure you fully understand the details of what it is you are challenging

3

When challenging others, put yourself in their shoes, try to see the situation through their eyes

4

When challenging yourself, remain as objective as possible about real risks and payoffs

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