Lead and Succeed

17 Reasons Your Leadership Approach May Be Killing Innovation in Your Business

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Leadership is difficult to cultivate and it's a skill just like any other that needs to be learned. Do you feel that your team is passive and unengaged, and that you're doing all of the work? How do you create a team that's actively involved, communicative, and takes charge to help you achieve your business goals?

The workplace has changed dramatically over the past decades. It is no longer a top-down situation where a boss commands his or her army of team members. Today, teams are more egalitarian, with team members more in control. The boss relinquishes control in strategic ways and enables his or her team to take the reins. When done effectively, this is a huge win-win for companies and their employees, and it gives the business a competitive advantage.

If you're not seeing the team member engagement you're hoping for, here are some of the things you might be doing wrong.

Top-Down Management

Top down management is the old management approach and it just doesn't work for an innovative company. If you're managing from top down, this means that you're running the meetings, directing the conversation, doing most of the talking, and generally micromanaging everything in your business.

You want a dynamic team that doesn't just take instruction from you, but takes its own initiative to get things done. This is how you harness each individual member's talents and create a team that works toward your goals. Nurture in each member their own leadership power, enthusiasm, and drive to collaborate.

No Strategy

You can't implement changes willy-nilly as you go along and expect consistent success. Instead, start with a clear goal and work your way backward so that you have a clear strategy for achieving that goal.

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The first step is to clarify. Take the overall goals of your company, as well as any short-term business goals you have, such as increasing sales, and ask yourself, "What needs to be done in order to achieve these goals?" This creates a consistent strategy that you can then impart to your team members. Once they see the big picture, they can figure out how they can contribute.

Maintaining the Status Quo

It's only natural for business owners to seek to maintain the status quo. After all, it's safe and it's what's working. But complacency is an innovation killer. Even when things are going according to plan, you need a constant infusion of new ideas to try out.

Never be afraid to try something new, and encourage your team members to take risks as well. Teach them to see failure as a learning opportunity. Make small changes and then monitor results before applying on a large scale. The risks that innovators take can become world-changing leaps forward.

Ideas with Nowhere to Go

Encourage your team to come up with their own ideas, but make sure these ideas have somewhere to go. All too often, leaders solicit ideas from their team and then don't use them. This is a waste of energy and can also be a morale killer. On the other hand, when an idea grows wings and produces result, this is a huge boost to your team.

All ideas should be geared toward a specific goal or solving a certain problem. They must be applicable for them to have value. It's this value that builds your team's confidence and shows them what can be done.

Impersonal Team Leadership

It's only natural that the focus of your team building should be on goals related to business. But it's a mistake to leave out the purely personal as well. Personal growth goes a long way in feeding professional development.

In addition to your team building, schedule coaching sessions with your team members where you tackle personal as well as professional obstacles. Take an active interest in your team members' lives and help them develop their soft skills in addition to their work-related skills. If a team member is happy and fulfilled in their personal life, this will make them more effective at the office.

Only Looking at Numbers

Some goals are measurable by quantitative means. You can crunch the numbers and see whether your goals are being met or not. But this isn't the only way to measure success and some leaders focus too much on quantitative data, and not enough on what's not easily measured.

When you're trying to instill certain qualities, attitudes, and behaviors in your team, these are not things that are easily measured through numbers. Instead, you need to choose other ways to measure success in the development of soft skills. For example, a team member who is timid during meetings might have as their "metric" sharing an idea in a meeting.

Failure to Ask Why

When you implement a new strategy, it clearly either works or doesn't work. You should repeat the efforts that work, and dismiss the ones that don't. But it's not enough to just react. You need to know why something works or doesn't work. Look deeper than the concrete results and you'll discover insights that will drive further innovation.

Failure to Coach

One-on-one coaching is essential to driving innovation. No matter how busy you are or how efficient your meetings are, you still need to meet team members one-on-one as well. There will be certain issues that can only be discussed in this setting. Plus, you can work on personal goals here that don't apply to the entire group.

Hold regular coaching sessions with each team member where you check in with them, review goals, and ask about their progress toward goals. These should be informal sessions and they should be driven by the team member. Your job is to ask questions, listen, and provide feedback.

Keeping Team Members in a Rut

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Each team member has their own role to play in your organization. But they can develop their skills a great deal by learning how other parts of your organization work. This gives them a big picture view of the organization and helps them better understand the roles of others.

Offer your employees cross training in other areas of your organization and rotate them through different positions and tasks.

No Problem Solving

Innovation isn't just about improving your organization's processes or efficiency. A great number of innovative ideas come from the need to address problems. In fact, you can use problems as a starting point for eliciting innovative ideas from your team members.

Take a problem you or your team faces and use it as the focal point of a task you give your organization. For example, the problem might be that sales are decreasing in one product type. Ask your team to suggest ideas for either raising sales in this area or optimizing sales elsewhere.

Unclear Criteria

Whenever presenting tasks for your team, make sure that the criteria is clear. They need to understand the expected result, your expectations, and the rules or boundaries for the task. Before your team gets started, review and ask them to repeat this information back to you so you're sure they understand. This will prevent their effort from going to waste.

Talking and Not Listening

In all of your interactions with your team – whether group meetings or one-on-one coaching – your main role is as a listener. If you're doing all the talking, you're doing something wrong.

During these important touch points with your team members, focus on presenting a problem, asking questions, and facilitating. Ask questions to draw out ideas from your team members and get them talking among themselves. You can intervene sometimes as a facilitator for the meeting or to offer your own expertise when needed.

Lack of Communication

At the core of all innovation is good communication between team members. Everyone needs to feel that they can freely share ideas and offer opinions. When people don't feel comfortable, nothing happens.

Make your best effort to facilitate good communication. As facilitator during meetings, try to draw out team members who are reluctant to speak. Create an environment where ideas are openly accepted and things aren't taken personally. Everyone needs to be comfortable expressing their ideas.

Lack of Feedback

Your team members need feedback on how their efforts are going. They need to know whether their innovative ideas are working or not. Giving feedback should be a regular part of your communications with team members. Check in and offer feedback even when there is nothing to report, letting them know that they're doing a good job. When giving feedback, it's best to start off by reviewing the goal.

Fear of Failure

Innovation involves taking risks. Your team members can't take risks if they're paralyzed by fear of failure. This fear keeps people from taking chances and reinforces the status quo.

You can instill in your team members the conviction that failure offers a valuable learning experience. One way to do this is to frame everything in terms of success instead of failure. In other words, stress what will happen if something succeeds rather than fails. When there is a failure, don't dwell on it. Take what you can learn from it and move on.

No Positive Reinforcement

Your team's morale has a massive impact on its ability to innovate. Your team members need confidence to know that their ideas can make great changes.

Make sure that you praise every successful effort and good idea. Recognize your team members for all that they do. Balance this reinforcement and spread it around so that everyone gets some and you're not just praising a handful of individuals. This will encourage everyone, even those who are less confident, to actively participate.

Walk the Walk

You're trying to instill an innovative culture in your team members. You do this not only through sharing your vision and creating the right environment but also by what you do yourself. You need to be the change you want to see in your organization.

You're modeling this culture for your employees through your own actions and behaviors. They will notice if you talk the talk but don't walk the walk. Clarify the changes you want to see in your motivation and work on yourself as well as working on your team members.

Leadership Resource

You can create the culture and team you want. Discover how to lead and coach your dream team.

Learn more