How to Inspire Your Team

By Charlie Feld

You can be intense and relaxed at the same time if you are confident in yourself and those around you. Just as you can sense this tension in athletes when the game is on the line, you can sense it in a leader.

A high-performance staff needs your trust, optimism and encouragement.

In the "Ring of Gyges" fable from Plato's The Republic, the philosopher poses this question: If a ring could make you invisible, would you steal, cheat or even murder? Or would you always do the right thing even though no one would know? Those who answer yes to the first question believe that people are inherently corrupt or lazy, and the only thing that keeps civilizations together are laws, rewards and punishments. Then there are people who believe in the basic goodness and industriousness of individuals; to them, people will always do the right thing when given a choice. From that dichotomy springs different management systems and environments in the workplace. One is full of rules; the other isn't. Both can deliver good results in the short to medium term, but it's the management system based on the more charitable view of human nature that sustains an organization and allows it to grow in an era of constant change.

Assuming you buy that assertion, then as a leader it is critical for you to act in a way that attracts, excites, expands and sustains the human spirit. Some people refer to this aspect of leadership as values; others call it the corporate culture. As leaders, we create the environment wherein people operate. If it is one of fear, then people will become risk averse. If it is one of criticism, then people's confidence will erode. But if you believe that people perform best when you trust in their better nature, then you have to foster an environment that offers your staff the freedom to do their best.

Let's assume that you have established the core leadership competencies I've discussed previously: You understand the lie of the land; you've built a great team; you have partnerships with stakeholders; and you are able to act decisively and stay focused. What, then, are the most important beliefs that can help you build a sustainable high-performance team?

Trust

Trust in your staff is table stakes. You cultivate trust by setting boundaries, within which people have certain freedoms (to make decisions, to take risks, to speak their minds) as well as certain obligations (to speak the truth, to be accountable for their decisions, to learn from their mistakes). People can't be productive when they are driven by rules, nor can anything be achieved when there are no boundaries and chaos reigns.

I've seen cultures at both extremes over the years. In one company where I worked, there were rules for everything and bureaucracy dominated the management system. The environment was orderly. But there was almost no room for individual judgment, and therefore, no one felt any ownership of their work or motivation to do it quickly. At the other extreme, I worked for a company that was so decentralized it was chaotic. Every group made up its own rules as it saw fit.

Neither of these environments led to high performance. But in a framework where people are trusted to operate, people will give their best. I have gone into environments where teams within the IT department were so rigidly organized that one group was unwilling to share its expertise with another. When we reorganized, my direct reports agreed to be evaluated on how well they shared their staffs with each other. They stopped hoarding talent and started trusting each other. Employees became more productive, and quality went up.
Hope
Next, it is important to understand that high-performing people have dreams for achievement that need to be fuelled by hope. It’s a truism that people will flourish when they have hope and that they give up when they become despondent. High performers thrive on the recognition they get from working through hard issues and persevering. This perseverance requires optimism.

The job of a leader in a hopeful environment is to be realistic and optimistic at the same time. Realism acknowledges the facts of a situation, no matter how unpleasant; optimism dictates that given the facts, we continue to work toward our goals. When I have been confronted with a team that has lost hope, I have taken on the role of a coach. Together, we acknowledge the facts and then begin to generate ideas for how to solve our problems.

Enjoyment
Now, make the environment enjoyable. People perform at peak levels when they enjoy what they do and whom they do it with. Don’t confuse enjoyment with frivolity, or the absence of challenging work. Real enjoyment at work comes when you and your team are deeply immersed in tackling a problem, and you persevere together.

You can be intense and relaxed at the same time if you are confident in yourself and those around you. Just as you can sense this tension in athletes when the game is on the line, you can sense it in a leader. When you communicate that combination of competitive fire and inner peace, you communicate to your team that - if we give everything we have and support each other - we will persevere.

You can set the tone that work is fun by demonstrating that you enjoy your job, that you like your staff and that you appreciate how hard they work. Sometimes, this is as simple as saying thank you to someone who worked all weekend. If you can laugh at mistakes instead of blaming people for them, your team can focus on winning instead of failing. If someone is working 60 hours a week, you shouldn’t care if he takes a two-hour lunch.

Opportunity
The last challenge is to create an environment wherein people can grow. Top performers need to learn new skills and develop new ideas in order to work at their peaks. People who learn new things, work with diverse groups of people and are given the opportunity to experience different roles that expand their worldview produce a richer organization. These skills and perspective-building mechanisms help to create people who respect differences, people who are more self-assured, who listen well and are more curious. As Peter Senge argues in The Fifth Discipline: This is different from the step-by-step process of acquiring skills that we know, but it’s necessary because the rate and scope of change has increased so dramatically.

When I was at Frito-Lay, our parent company, PepsiCo, had a staff development system that rotated people through different parts of the business. This strategy kept people energized and motivated to perform at higher levels.

As a leader, you have the power to influence people and therefore their performance. If you believe in creating an environment where trust, optimism, enjoyment and personal growth are encouraged, then you will build a sustainable, high-performing team - and, in the process, create many new leaders.

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