

Closing the Gap Between Success and Significance

Written by Tom Northup, October, 2004

Think of the person you most admire. This might be a teacher, a business associate, an inspirational leader, a mentor or friend who made a significant impact on your life. You remember them for what they did for you at a time when you needed their direction.

Contrast this person with the college professor who said, "You can interpret this story two ways, my way and the wrong way."

In the past, accepted business leadership styles resembled the college professor's attitude. Using a command style, executives demanded better, faster, cheaper, more efficient strategies, pushing employees to higher standards and criticizing rather than praising.

As a result, the driver leader struggled, employees refused to make an emotional commitment, the management team did not work in a unified fashion and the organization suffered.

The changing world

Today's business leaders face a world undergoing change such as we have never seen before. New technology, international competition, lightning information availability, and new legal accountability challenge leaders to make not just directional but transformational changes to remain competitive.

In this environment, it is difficult for a CEO, President, or leader to drive an organization to realize its vision and to deliver sustainable results.

The changing leadership model.

Many leaders forget a basic adage of leadership. Their success depends on the success of their employees and co-workers. High level leaders understand that they contribute to this success by making it easier for their employees to do their jobs, by making them feel that their jobs have significant value and by treating them as individuals with valid opinions and suggestions.

Research shows that the organizational climate, the way people think about working for an organization, has a significant impact on human performance. The way employees perceive the leader and his management team drives the organizational climate and employee performance.

In today's world-class organization, people at every level must have a personal stake in the vision of the business. The world-class leader understands that the most important part of his job is to develop an organization where people want to work and want to do their best.

Like the person you admire the most, today's effective business leaders develop significance with their associates. They enjoy continued long-term professional and personal success. They leave an indelible impact on their employees, customers and suppliers because of what they do and continue to do for them.

Becoming a significant leader

Turn this around and ask yourself who sees you as their mentor, as their inspiration, as memorable in their life. This may be difficult at first since we seldom see ourselves as making a significant impact on others.

Ask yourself how many people in your life want to help you? How many people have you dedicated your time and energy to help this year? If the answer to both questions is "a handful," you may lead a comfortable life, but you will not develop significance in your relationships.

To create significance, you must develop the attitude of the "Servant's Heart". You must ask how you can help people.

This requires you to shift your focus. You develop a Servant's Heart by dedicating yourself to the success of those who help you achieve your success. A self-centered driver has fleeting success because he builds on too small a foundation.

People walk around with the letters MMFA - Make Me Feel Appreciated – as a figurative imprint on their foreheads. You, as a leader with a Servant's Heart, must ask how you can help these people become more effective and feel more important. You must make your customers, employees and suppliers understand that you have their best interests at heart and that your commitment is unconditional.

All of us aspire to reach our dreams and goals. The leader with a "Servant's Heart" inspires others who realize that he cares about them and wants them to succeed at a personal level. When people realize that they can reach their personal goals through helping the organization reach its goals, they make impressive results possible.

Important attitudes that lead to significance

Empathy, defined as the understanding of others, is the fundamental trait that leads to significance. The three levels of empathy are:

- Being able to read another's emotions
- Sensing and responding to a person's unspoken concerns or feelings.
- Understanding the issues or concerns that lie behind another's feelings.

People with this ability notice emotional cues, listen well, show sensitivity, and understand others' perspectives.

You, as an empathetic leader, sense others' needs and bolster their abilities by looking past the obvious. You see the next step and how to get there. You want to help

subordinates and co-workers build their personal identity and their self-image so they can become more successful and you want them to realize that you too are doing the same thing.

You, as the authentic leader with empathy, give advice that serves the person's best interests. When people understand that you have a sincere desire that they succeed, they respond with great enthusiasm. In an organization where people want to be and do their best, you can obtain great results.

Making personal changes is not easy.

You can use several proven steps to assist you to become an empathetic leader.

First, you must acknowledge your current attitudes before you can change them. People with strong self-awareness understand emotions, strengths, limitations, values and motives at a deep level. They are honest with themselves and about themselves. They know the direction they want their life to take and why.

Second, to make personal changes you must practice the new actions and thoughts you want to develop. In sports, athletes spend far more time practicing and than performing. Tiger Woods hits hundreds of practice shots for every tournament shot. In contrast, we in the business world perform but never practice. To be more successful we must practice skills and attitudes that will further our success.

As you practice building empathy and the other skills you need to become significant in others' lives, you must track your new skills. Busy lives make it is easy to delay doing uncomfortable tasks. However, when you hold yourself accountable you will stay on target and make progress towards your goals.

Finally, use a coach or mentor. At the times when you get cranky, a trusted friend, colleague or coach can give you an unbiased perspective. By helping you through rough times, they help you stay focused on your goal.

A caveat.

To build a business culture where employees have a say in the direction of the organization, you do not need to give up leadership. The effective leader understands the importance of building a culture where accountability is expected.

Some might object that working through others as opposed to giving firm direction leads to pressure to lower performance standards, tempting us to make accommodations to personal interests.

Effective leaders understand the importance of building a culture that expects accountability. They hold individuals and the organization accountable every step of the way to reaching the future they envision.

Effective leaders work with individuals without compromising performance. Under such leaders, employees understand and accept the importance of meeting objectives they have helped establish. They understand that when they help the organization meet its goals they meet their own goals. This dynamic has a substantial positive effect on performance by both the organization and the individual.

Successful leaders insist on involving their employees in the planning process as a way to build personal commitment. With a "Servant's Heart," significant leaders have their employees' best interests at heart and will commit to their personal development.

Successful leaders insist on a continuous process of planning and development, of accountability and results, and build the culture of the organization around these cornerstones.

Significance is a timeless concept.

People want to feel appreciated. You remember the people you most admire for what they did and do for you. As an empathetic leader, you leave an indelible impact on the lives of others. You accomplish this by developing a "Servant's Heart", helping them become more successful.

In a healthy organization people have a personal stake in the vision of the business. The effective leader develops an organization where people want to work and want to do their best. At the same time he does not sacrifice performance. He builds accountability into the culture of the organization. Everyone understands the performance imperative and this mutual understanding brings great results.

Gaining personal success through helping others is timeless. William Shakespeare said, "The more I give to thee, the more I have."

And to quote Ralph Waldo Emerson, "A man cannot help another without helping himself even more."

To become an extraordinary leader and develop sustainable success, become significant. Make an indelible impact on the lives of others.