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What an Intern Taught Me About Leadership

By Ben Berger

Editor's note: In the Leadership & Development Section's Leadership Inspiration Contest, entrants were asked to tell us what inspired them to be better actuarial leaders. Here is one of the early entrant winners.

What inspires me to be a better leader? Until recently, I haven't had more than a canned answer, something like "I'll need to be an effective leader if I want to progress through my career." Until recently, I didn't have any firsthand, direct leadership experience. Until recently, I didn't fully grasp the impact a great leader can have on those who follow in their footsteps.

My first taste of leadership came after I'd been out of college and in my actuarial role for a year; I got the opportunity to work heavily with a summer intern on my team. It was mostly focused on helping her learn the product and understand her various projects, but that experience taught me the importance of things like clear communication, breaking down difficult concepts into manageable pieces and documentation. (So. Much. Documentation.) What I didn't learn was anything about the more "human" side of leading an employee. I didn't understand the difficulty of that part of the equation—until recently, that is.

Enter a defining moment in my young career. Just a week and a half ago, I said good-bye to a different summer intern, someone I was formally leading for a little less than three months. Not only was I responsible for communicating concepts and vision and getting him up to speed on projects, but suddenly I was also responsible for equipping him to succeed in his internship and helping him develop, both personally and professionally. We've all had development discussions where our leaders ask us intentionally vague questions like, "Where do you want to be in five years?" But now, I'm not the person who just spouts nice-sounding answers like, "Leading two to three direct reports"—I'm the one who has to think of ways to help his direct report *actually achieve* these lofty goals. Talk about pressure!

As the summer progressed and I learned more about my intern and his goals, I got excited about the potential of what my role



could be. I have the ability to help shape someone's future. He certainly carries the lion's share of that responsibility, but there's no denying that I have a part to play. In case I had any doubt, it's a new part of my job description and performance goals. While that's a somewhat daunting thought, it's also a huge opportunity and an invigorating prospect. It inspired me to heavily invest in learning how to coach and develop people, which drove me to seek advice from my own current and past leaders and mentors. Through that, I also gained a deeper appreciation for how much I owe to them.

If you've been looking for a way to make a difference in someone's career, this is it. Lead. Influence. Inspire. Give back the coaching you've been lucky enough to receive, and help others learn from the mistakes you've made. Believe me when I say that watching someone develop under your direction is its own reward, and well worth the investment. ■



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