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Four Reasons why Your Excellent Productivity Makes You a bad Leader

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When I started my journey to become a certified leadership coach, trainer and speaker, one of my biggest surprises was how little the actuaries around me seemed to care about developing their soft skills.

We all spoke about the importance of soft skills to get promoted. We all used leadership buzzwords. But when it came to putting in the time and effort to practice and hone those skills, the answer usually was a version of “I don’t need it” or “I don’t really have the time.”

I fully understand that point of view. After all, actuaries are smart individuals and there’s no question that their production ability is what got them into that influential position. They may be thinking, “Why would I need to work on my leadership skills if I’m already in a leadership role?”

The answer is simple: Being a leader is not a glorified production role; it’s about setting direction, creating a strategy, planning for the future and developing the next generation of talent.

Yet, most actuaries, including myself until recently, approach a leadership role as an upgraded technical role.

In this article I discuss four mindset mistakes smart people make when they first land a leadership role.

1. ASKING FOR HELP IS A SIGN OF WEAKNESS

The primary sin of the high achiever is the phrase “I can figure it out.”

The higher you go in the success ladder, the more you may think you have to have all the answers, because that proves you deserve the role.

Yes, it is true you can figure it out. But should you? Isn’t there someone else who could take that project on so you can use the time for something more leadership related? (And perhaps it will be a development opportunity for that other person!)

I ran into this situation many times when I offered my help to directors, vice presidents, regional leads and other business leaders. I did it myself, too.

There is this fear that if we accept help, our staff will think we aren’t good enough to be in that position. In fact, when leaders choose to never ask for help nor accept it, they become so swamped in work that they don’t have time to take care of their staff, set the vision or ensure the strategy is being implemented.

Let’s put it to bed: The staff already knows our weaknesses and pretending we don’t need help simply shows a lack of integrity and opens the door for distrust.

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2. IT TAKES ME LONGER TO TRAIN THEM THAN TO DO IT

I love this one because it’s true. Yes, the people who use this phrase will always be right, because they have performed the task before and it’s also their way of solving the problem.

The trouble is that this is shortsighted in regards to what most benefits the organization. The up-front cost of training a staff member to do the production tasks we used to do might be high, but it’s relatively small in the long run. Why? Because a leader is supposed to be handling the big picture for the team or organization, not doing hands-on work 80 percent of the time.

I remember the first time we introduced a new trend model at my company. Our vice president spent two weeks of hands-on work analyzing trend with us and making all decisions. While he was with us for those two weeks, there was no one to work on the overall financial analysis and strategic planning.

Since he was making all decisions and performing the analysis, having 20 actuaries in a room watching him do it was an expensive misuse of resources.



The main benefit of training someone to do what we used to do is that the next time the task shows up, we don't have to do it ourselves. The time we save can be used for something more strategic in nature.

3. BEING RESPONSIBLE FOR IT EQUATES TO "I HAVE TO DO IT"

This mindset is one of the biggest fallacies we retain from our production days. Since we got promoted by doing all kinds of technical tasks, we assume that when we start leading, we also have to be doing everything that comes to our desk.

Whether it is fear of lack of control or having the sense of responsibility for the success of the team, leaders need to change this mindset. Being accountable for the results of the team doesn't mean we have to do everything ourselves.

It's funny how we want things to be delegated to us when we are starting a job, but we forget to delegate when we start leading a team. When we are leading a team, we need to ask *who* should be doing the project rather than *how* is it going to get done.

4. MY JOB IS TO PRODUCE MORE THAN MY TEAM

This is the mindset that differentiates leaders from individual contributors.

All leaders must transition from production to strategy. What I mean is that the leader's effectiveness is not measured by how many projects, tools, analyses or gadgets he or she produces but by how well the team performs.

The leader has to start thinking about

- setting the pace for the team,
- identifying gaps in talent,
- establishing future goals,
- equipping the staff with the resources needed to do the job,
- generating team members' engagement, and
- developing each person's talents.

A leader is required to think beyond the tasks. Unfortunately, since our promotion comes from how much we produce, we tend to think the same approach is what works in a leadership role.

A FEW POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO TRY

When you're ready to rethink your mindset, give these ideas a try:

- Test the notion of asking for help or accepting it and see if it changes how your staff thinks of you.
- Pick one project you would rather not do, take a couple of hours to train your best prospect on how to do it, let her do it a few times, then have her train someone else.
- Ask "Who on my team is a better fit to tackle this project?" to start testing delegation. Hint: Sometimes your most experienced person is not the right person for the job.
- Look for a combination of passion, talent, interest and experience to determine the *who* when delegating.
- Practice thinking about what's best for the team, and focus on activities that improve the team as a whole rather than a specific task or project.

At the end of the day, leadership expands beyond ourselves. It is a transition from *me* to *us*.

I hope this challenged you to shift your perspective. ■



Juan Arroyo uses inquisitive conversations to guide high achievers on maximizing their talent to go from success to significance. Schedule a 90-minute strategy session by emailing hello@juanonecoaching.com.