

Leadership

Be a fearless leader: Create an environment where employees can do their best work

A true leader sets the content and tone for interaction within her organization, and it is her responsibility to nurture an environment where people can do their best work, said Alesia Latson, founder of Latson Leadership Group and author of “Does Your Staff Respect You...Or Do They Fear You?”

But sometimes when things get busy, the best of leaders can slip and forget to monitor their tone, which can be far more powerful than their words, the consultant said.

The overall effect of such slips can be devastating to an organization, Latson said, and most leaders are not conscious of how they may instill fear and/or anxiety in the employee(s) reporting to them. Over a period of time, such lapses may lead to:

- An increase in a worker’s dissatisfaction,
- A decrease in employee engagement and willingness to offer discretionary energy and effort,
- A decrease in trust, and
- An impact on the employees’ morale and well-being.

“A leader’s official authority creates a status differential,” Latson said. “The person with the highest status is threatening to the person with the lower status, and we’re always sensing where we are in that status relationship. Leaders are inherently threatening, although it’s typically not their intention.”

Given the unique position that managers play in employees’ lives, when a worker feels he has displeased the boss, he can become apprehensive, the consultant said, because there is so much at stake: his professional life, financial situation and physical and psychological well-being may all be affected by his employer.

“The boss occupies a space in your life unlike anybody else because the boss determines your very livelihood,” Latson said. “When people are having dinner, who are they most likely to talk about? The boss is the number-one answer, and we introduce to him all the important people in our lives because he occupies that space.”

Simple requests such as asking an employee to come into the manager’s office or interrupting an employee during a meeting have been known to unravel workers, the consultant said.

“It’s happened to all of us individually and collectively,” Latson said. “When we hear the boss ask, ‘Joe, can you come in here for a moment?’ we think ‘Are we next?’ or when the boss makes a simple request like ‘Please come into my office,’ it can put an employee on edge and erode his confidence. It may not be happening on a conscious level, but subconsciously it is noise that distracts us from really being able to focus,” she said.

That’s why it’s so important for leaders to understand the status differential, Latson said, and to manage the dynamic that comes with it by:

- **Setting the content and tone for interactions.** We wouldn’t think twice about planning ahead of time for an event at our homes with guests, but sometimes managers don’t prepare properly to meet with their employees, Latson said. Leaders must decide what they want to happen at these workplace gatherings, she said. “How you show up, own your role and provide content in these instances makes a difference in which people can do their best work. That’s your job as a leader,” Latson said.

- **Making preferences known to staffers.** If a leader wants information presented a certain way, she should make a request to her employees. Workers innately want to please the boss, so tell people how to operate and you’ll get what you’ve asked for, Latson said.

- **Monitoring your tone.** It’s not the words you say, it’s the tone in which you say them. Latson recommends that leaders develop “tone spotters,” or people who they trust that can give them good information about their tone during interactions with staff.

- **Headlining words.** Remember that as a leader you are inherently threatening, so make sure to
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headline requests. "Instead of saying 'Come into my office,' say 'Joe, come into my office. I want to get your reaction about XYZ,'" Latson said.

"It's an extraordinary privilege to be in service of others and to be able to create an environment where people can bring their best creative selves to finding solutions to society's most vexing problems," Latson said. "Build relationships not just for the sake of building relationships but to build trust and transparency. It's a real opportunity to engage people and it only takes a little forethought

to create conditions where people can do their best work. A fearless leader will forward that agenda."

For more information

Alesia Latson is a speaker, trainer, and coach and founder of Latson Leadership Group, a consulting firm specializing in management and leadership development. With more than 20 years of experience, Latson helps organizations and leaders expand their capacity to produce results while enhancing employee engagement. For more information or to contact Alesia Latson, go to <http://www.latsonleadershipgroup.com/>. ■