

EMPLOYEE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT: *A Shared Leadership Model for Changing Organizations and People*

By Dr. Sharon Rose Powell

The way people treat each other in companies and other organizations is affected by the common vision that employees share. One of the deepest desires underlying shared vision is the desire to be connected, to a larger purpose and to one another.

– Peter Senge, 1990

The Psychologically Healthy Workplace

Most of us go through our lives using no more than a fraction of the potential within us. (Gardner, 1990) The way a company conducts its business and treats its employees can either reinforce this lost potential or nurture the untapped capabilities that every person possesses. It is a well-known fact within American corporations that employees are more likely to perform effectively when they experience mutual trust and loyalty from their colleagues, are involved in decisions about their work, and believe the company cares about their development as individuals. It is easier to acknowledge this fact, however, than it is to create and maintain a corporate culture that embodies the principles of trust and shared decision-making.

The issue of developing employees' potential is further complicated by the team-based environment in which many companies operate – how can companies promote individual excellence while, at the same time, encouraging a collaborative approach to solving problems and producing innovative, coordinated action? Even those companies that rely on individual achievement inevitably find themselves operating in a team environment, at times. It is important for companies to provide opportunities for individual professional development as well as to offer training in the development of collaborative skills and practices. Before companies can increase team cooperation, individual employees need the kind of training experiences that foster honest, thoughtful communication among employees and the opportunity to receive constructive feedback. A psychologically healthy workplace values the importance of team-building and leadership development for all of its employees. Organizations that create a climate of trust and mutual respect develop healthy practices and rituals that all employees can learn, participate in, and support.

Ultimately, healthy organizations reflect the example of their leadership. In such an organization, management checks in with employees regularly to get feedback on what's working and not working. These organizations build in time for professional development. Leadership skills are taught and nurtured across the company, so that employees can learn and practice new skills and have the time to plan, implement and assess progress. In a healthy work environment, employees have a common vision about what's possible, and they feel empowered to make that vision a reality. A sense of commitment and passion is shared among employees. People are willing to risk thinking creatively; share their ideas openly; and deal with conflict in a timely and thoughtful fashion.

Working in a Pressure Zone

A company's long-term success lies in building a strong foundation of healthy relationships among employees. The basic communication skills implicit in building these relationships can be named and taught, and teaching them to employees as part of their professional development plan establishes a company-wide shared language and set of assumptions. Three critical skills that can help employees work in increasingly diverse and demanding work environments are: Active Listening, Negotiation, and Straight Talk. At the Princeton Center, we have developed a simulation game called "The Pressure Zone" that teaches employees how to use these three skills in commonplace work situations, thus helping them maneuver through potentially conflict-ridden scenarios with care. Each of these skills is defined below in the context of three sample situations that players of "The Pressure Zone" must successfully address in order to progress along the game board.

Situation #1: A colleague confides in you that he didn't get the raise he was expecting and he's very upset.

Active Listening Standards: Paraphrase what you're hearing and reflect back to him what you think he must be feeling. Avoid giving advice or making a judgment about his situation.

Situation #2: A colleague has asked for your help on a project but you are feeling overwhelmed with an assignment that is already overdue.

Negotiation Standards: Clarify what your colleague wants and offer an alternative for not helping him at this time. Create a "win-win" situation by reaching an agreement that meets both of your needs.

Situation #3: An employee who is under your supervision has been coming to work late, and you are concerned about his recent lack of motivation in meeting deadlines.

Straight Talk Standards: Share with this person what you appreciate or value about this work as well as what is getting in the way of a successful working relationship. Make sure he can "play back" to you what you've said to avoid any miscommunication.

In each of these simulated experiences, employees practice new ways of communicating with each other and, in the process, they establish a healthier work environment that promotes mutual respect and trust.

Creating a Climate for Positive Change

Once employees have the tools for improving their communication with one another, companies can then direct their attention to a model of shared leadership, or an environment in which skilled and motivated individuals are empowered to provide feedback and take action to further the vision of the company. The Princeton Center can help to build the leadership capacity of organizations to establish such a model. It involves three essential steps or stages: (1) conducting **Focus Groups** that reach all employees in a company; (2) running **Town Meetings** that include large group gatherings and small group reflection; and (3) creating **Action Teams** that implement needed internal changes that have been identified during this three-step process.

The support and participation of upper management in every level of this process is critical. Company executives must be willing to move to a shared-leadership model that involves all employees in developing and enacting a common vision. Executives must be comfortable receiving constructive feedback from employees about what's working and not working within the company. And, finally, those that run the company must commit the time required for teams of employees to work on improving the company's internal communications. In our experience, what seems initially to be time away from daily work is in fact an investment in the development of a positive, forward-looking organizational energy that yields long-term productivity. Creating a climate for positive change within a company begins with courageous and committed executives who are open, flexible and responsive – who are themselves willing to take a risk.

Conducting Focus Groups

A Focus Group is a small discussion forum intended to expedite the exchange of ideas in an honest, safe and constructive way within a company or organization. (Powell and Attias, 2000) Focus group teams are diverse and thoughtfully put together. Employees with different roles from all divisions within a company are selected to become co-facilitators of Focus Groups. Each two-person team runs a forum for 10-12 other employees. The co-facilitators have two roles. First, their role is to engage group members in thoughtful discussion and guide them to reflect, share and gain new understanding about company goals and future needs. Second, their role is to accurately document the ideas and suggestions of focus group members by recording verbatim comments and highlighting key themes. Focus Group facilitators are trained by Princeton Center staff to carry out these two roles confidently and competently. Focus Group questions examine issues that affect the culture and climate of the organization, such as current vision; level of trust within the company; clarity regarding employee roles and responsibilities; employee morale and commitment to company goals; degree of confidence in the organization's leadership; and employee empowerment and willingness to take risks.

Running Town Meetings

After all data from Focus Group meetings has been collected, analyzed and prioritized, the results are communicated at a large group gathering of all employees—sometimes referred to as a Town Meeting. Town Meetings are vital public gatherings that embody and showcase not only a company's commitment to communication, but also its willingness to act on its employees' needs and concerns. Upper level management conducts this meeting and plays back to employees the central themes that came out of the Focus Group meetings and the specific suggestions made to improve the internal workings of the company (note that this approach demonstrates Active Listening). A list of short- and long-term improvements is presented with a timetable for action.

Immediately following the presentation, employees are given the opportunity to reflect together on what they've heard, and provide feedback to upper management. They return to their small group forums, which are led by the same two facilitators who ran their Focus Group. Sufficient time is provided for these groups to respond to the presentation – specifically, what did members hear that most excited them and what is still missing from the plan of action that must be addressed to improve communication, company morale, best work practices, etc. Each team reports back to the large group, and agreements are made about next steps.

Creating Action Teams

Action Teams represent the next phase of committing to a shared leadership model that views its employees as a rich intellectual and strategic resource. Teams that embody the diversity of interests and talents within the organization are formed to research or carry out the mutually agreed-upon plans of top executives and company employees. It is recommended that each team is co-led by trained employee-facilitators who have knowledge about group dynamics and skill in how to conduct meetings and encourage the active participation of all members. This process of sharing leadership across all facets of the company will raise employee morale and increase personal commitment to the company's vision and goals. If the company's vision is unclear or is creating conflict, then one of the Action Teams may want to take employees through a visioning exercise that helps build a common understanding of what the company's primary mission is and where it's going in the future. Another Action Team may want to tackle ways to introduce new rituals or company practices that help to build an *esprit de corps* among employees. Action Team tasks may be short- or long-term, but the team's specific objectives always derive from Focus Group data and Town Meeting agreements. Action Teams periodically report their progress at follow-up Town Meetings to insure accountability and encourage ongoing input from employees not directly involved on the teams.

Conclusion

We strongly encourage companies and organizations to commit to individual growth and development as well as team training for their employees. The dual process of giving employees tools for effective communication, and then establishing a shared leadership model, promotes the institutionalization of healthy practices throughout the company. A positive working environment that respects people and encourages collaboration and cooperation is the result of such a process. Individual employees are happier and, thus, more productive and successful. It takes time to create the conditions that support employee growth and development. At the Princeton Center for Leadership Training, we believe it's about time!

REFERENCES

- Gardner, J.W. (1990). *On leadership*. New York: The Free Press.
- Powell, Sharon Rose and Attias, Abby (2000). *Facilitation Toolkit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Center for Leadership Training.
- Senge, Peter M. (1990). *The fifth discipline - the art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Doubleday.