Walk the Walk

"It's better to know some of the
questions than all of the answers."
-James Thurber

Coaching, A Key Area Of Leadership

Coaching is one of the key areas of leverage available to a leader for the improvement of organizational thinking. But before you embark on telling others how to improve their thinking, be sure you personally demonstrate clear thinking yourself. Modeling good thinking skills should be a prerequisite to playing the role of coach! Our behavior often sends a much more powerful message than our words ever could. By virtue of your position as a leader, your behavior announces to all "this is what it takes to win in this organization." Make the message your behavior sends consistent with what you say.

Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is

For instance, if you want your people to learn new skills, even the most eloquent mission statement is not enough to get the job done. Unless you commit organizational resources to provide the needed training, all the rhetoric will do is undermine credibility and erode trust. Remember, ignorance is not empowering. If you communicate a reluctance to let your employees take time away from work for training, this sends a message, too!

Show You Care About Better Thinking On The Job

Once your people have received training, your role is to demonstrate that using the skills is both expected and rewarded. You may want to make mastery of these skills part of your employees' formal performance evaluation criteria. As a leader, what you emphasize will make a difference in people's behavior.

Talk-the-Talk: Observing and Asking Questions Monitoring

There are two things that you can do to leverage your time and effort. Monitoring the processes your people use is one. Focusing on process takes less effort than chasing down every bad idea and you harvest a greater payoff long-term by showing people you care about how they think.

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Questioning

Appropriate questioning starts with the big picture (Concern Analysis) and then moves to specific processes (Problem Solving, Decision Making, Planning). Consistent use of this logical approach with subordinates will result in changing how they prepare. They will anticipate what questions you will ask and come ready to answer them.

Coaching Examples

Coaching your people to become competent, independent thinkers means less work for you! This involves helping them understand the best way to approach issues based upon the logical needs of the situation. The following example portrays what it might look like if you were to delegate work by providing background information that shares your thinking and makes it clear what their contribution should be:

Coaching a Decision

COACH: We have an increasing problem with longer and longer average durations of absences of professional staff. We have found out that the cause of this problem was a policy change that requires the employee to pay for the first day of any absence and the company to pay for any subsequent days. You might begin by researching the previous policy to find out why a change was made in the first place. This should reveal what problem the old decision was trying to address.

Then, I'd like your help in applying the decision-making process to this issue to see if we can create a better policy, one that does not encourage long absences. Here are a few of the objectives I have come up with and some of the options being discussed by others. Feel free to suggest other objectives and create new options.

In the example above, notice that the Coach requested the use of the Decision-Making process, shared her thinking, and clearly invited more ideas about objectives and solutions.

At another meeting… **Coaching in a problem situation**

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COACH: What did you find out at the committee meeting this morning?

EE: The committee wants to make a recommendation about a new policy on educational reimbursement for college credits. They want to eliminate the necessity for pre-approval.

COACH: What triggered this interest in changing the policy?

EE: Complaints due to the long delay between asking for and getting approval. The average time has been eight weeks.

COACH: What is causing the delay?

EE: There was no agreement on that. Many think it's a lack of staff.

COACH: But that is just a potential cause which has not been verified – correct?

Knowing the cause of the problem is important before deciding the best course of action. The policy may not need to be changed at all. Use the Problem-Solving process to uncover the true cause and then we can look for solutions.

Notice that the coach didn't just buy into the EE's pre-framed decision of either eliminating the pre-approval process or not. Instead, the coach asked a key question to understand the specific data driving the concern. This revealed a problem with an unknown cause. Key questions like this can help avoid making hasty decisions that may come back to haunt us.

Some Key Questions

Here are some of the most powerful questions we've found for focusing people's thinking . . .

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Concern Analysis

- What specifically did you observe that triggered this concern?
- Should this cluster of effects be separated for analysis or are you sure these effects are caused by the same thing?
- Do you know the cause of this?
- Do we need to take an interim action?
- What analysis should be done on this issue?
- Which should be addressed first and why?

Problem-Solving

- May I see your cause analysis?
- What is different or changed and how might this cause the problem?
- Why is the problem happening here and not here?
- What additional information will verify the true cause of this problem?
- What caused the cause? Have you created a root diagram?

Decision-Making

- May I see your decision analysis?
- What is the purpose of this decision?
- What are the most important results this decision should achieve?
- What other alternatives were considered?
- What risks are associated with these contending alternatives?

Planning

- May I see your action plan?
- What high threat potential problems do you anticipate?
- How can the threat of these potential problems be reduced or managed?

SUMMARY

The leadership in an organization will be the determining factor in how thoroughly and accurately employees

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implement what they have learned. Here are four leverage points for making change.

1. **Personal Competence**: The leader should first know and understand the thinking framework.

2. **Support**: The leader should tangibly support the use of the thinking skills organizationally with time and money. Also recognition of those who are effective at using the new skills.

3. **Model**: Next, the processes should be used in the leader's own meetings, especially with decisions that will be made visible to the employees.

4. **Coach**: The leader should ask process questions in the daily work environment to encourage, assist, and require those they coach in using the new thinking skills.

Get More Information?

In our 30+ years helping people improve the quality of their thinking, we have learned much about how to embed critical thinking skills in an organizations' procedures **[read article here]** thereby improving organizational intelligence. If you are interested in improving the thinking of employees, coaches and leaders please **contact us** to learn about our **Critical Thinking Workshops**.