Supportive AND Demanding: 4 Ways Great Leaders Can Be Both – Simultaneously

When people have heart attacks, it's important that they recognize that what's failed is an organ (or organs) in their body. *They* weren't the reason for the failure.

Along the same lines, a screw-up by your team members doesn't necessarily mean that *they* are at fault but rather that their work output is.

In other words, criticism shouldn't be taken personally. And, if as the leader, you can instill this mentality as a core cultural value at your company, poor performers may start thinking, "Hey, I need to improve; this guy (or gal) doesn't hate me – he (or she) is just trying to run a business."

Angela Duckworth, author of the bestselling *Grit*, wrote about this in a recent article in the *Washington Post.* Duckworth said that bosses must be as supportive as they are challenging in order to prove that they genuinely want people to succeed. She wrote that she believes talent takes you only so far: that *how* you react to setbacks is the real predictor of future success.

Ducksworth further likened leadership to parenting: You have to challenge the people whose development you're responsible for while at the same time supporting their progress.

So, rather than telling employees that their results aren't up to par and that you're disappointed in their performance, be a supportive leader. Approach team members' failures with positivity and encouragement. What's key is letting them know that you believe they can do better.

Staying supportive while holding people accountable

“Soft on people, hard on results.” To me, this mantra, which I first heard many years ago, is another way of saying that managers are responsible for the well-being and growth of their teams.

Employees who are held accountable for meeting performance goals are more than twice as likely to be engaged at work, according to research by Gallup. Yet only about 20 percent of those surveyed said that their managers had even talked to them about how to reach their goals. What’s more, only 30 percent strongly believed that being involved in setting goals or that receiving feedback would motivate them to do better work.

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When it comes to building teams, employee development must align with your organization’s goals. While results are the driving force behind any business, people are fallible. Keeping this in mind as a leader will help you build more valuable relationships with your employees, which helps them see you not only as the person controlling their income stream, but also someone they trust to help. The key is to be demanding and supportive *at the same time.*

According to the Society for Human Resource Management’s 2016 *Employee Job Satisfaction and Engagement* survey, the most engaged employees cite their relationships with leadership as the reason they stay engaged. The key to building that engagement is to offer support for as long as possible; when it’s time to be demanding, make your demands very clear. Here are four ways to do that.

1. How do you spell love? T.I.M.E.

Leadership IQ found that people who spend just six hours per week in direct contact with leadership are more inspired, motivated, engaged and innovative. Time is, indeed, the big equalizer, and there's no substitute for it. Get to know your teammates on a personal level: Where are they going on vacation? What sports do their kids play? Engaging with people where it matters lets them know that you see them as more than workhorses.

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Kuty Shalev, founder and CEO of Clevertech, believes personal ambition is the key to a teammate's value. In Clevertech's "Dream Goals" workshop, which helps longtime employees discover their real purpose, participants aren't asked generic, nebulous questions, but instead questions about the places and activities on their bucket lists and their visions of the future.

For Shalev, helping employees clarify their deepest desires goes a long way toward his gaining their trust.

In my own experience, when you truly connect with people, they believe you have their backs. If this is not the case, and you call out their failures in front of everyone, they're going to adopt a posture of self-defense; all of your candor and transparent communication will go right out the window. Instead, you should be building rapport privately and publicly, but saving the criticism for private conversations.

2. Move people up or out.

This is another old-school sales expression that shaped my management style. People are always moving in one of two directions: They're getting better, or they're working

themselves out of a job. Both are OK.

Cultivating an autonomous and independent meritocracy allows those who are ambitious and entrepreneurial to rise. These people will also admit when they've messed up, and ask for help. If your open-door policy is legit, your relationship with them will be more productive and collaborative. Those who aren't ambitious require a lot more direction and tend to self-select out.

Bob Glazer, founder and CEO of Acceleration Partners has written on his company's blog that he supports his company's high expectations and goals for employees through a mix of encouragement and training. He's said he understands how keeping people on who aren't a good fit can damage perceptions among their teammates.

Early on, for example, he ended up having to let go of two high-performing contractors because, while clients loved them, these employees didn't take a team-based approach to deadlines or communication.

If an employee of yours exhibits behavior that doesn't align with your values or can't keep up with the evolving nature of his or her role, you too should consider terminating this person. Let people know that you care, but also that everyone tows a fair share of the load.

Don't let things spiral just because you have a strong relationship with someone. If you make your expected results known, your A-team will deliver. Everyone else must move up or out.

3. Keep development and discipline separate.

Remember: If you're the boss, people are already scared of you. Don't give them reason to be by delivering mixed

messages. When it’s really time for a disciplinary talk, make it clear that you’re discussing consequences, not just room for improvement.

Early on, we encouraged improvement by telling our employees to work on certain things. Our message aimed to be developmental, but people mistook these directives for discipline and thought they had strikes against them.

So, we, the company leaders, were the ones who changed.

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We now have “island talks” that focus on consequences and discipline. Everyone knows the rule: Three island talks, and you’re fired. Employees will ask whether any given conversation is an island talk, and we will clarify whether that’s the case — or whether our conversation is just focused on development.

When you build the kind of relationships that make your employees want to deliver for you, it makes the tough talks a little bit easier. Employees won’t approach those conversations with fear but with openness. It’s a fine line to walk between supporting and demanding, but you’ve got to find it if you want your company to grow.

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