

LeadershipFAQs

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"Empowering leaders to live life on purpose"

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ENCOURAGING YOUR LEADERS

Part 3 of 3

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Forgive me Machiavelli. But the most effective means of sustained motivation is encouragement. Radical change usually requires placing one's self or organization into a vulnerable position. Just ask anyone who has been through a career shift, joint-venture, acquisition, or re-organization. Encouragement can give staying power through the adventure and stave off the wolves. It is most effective when it is timely, properly directed, and authentic.

In my experience of coaching leaders, many of them underestimate the value or power of their comments both good and bad. I think most people minimize their influence, be it at work, home, church, or community.

Howard Schultz, Chairman and Chief Global Strategist of Starbucks Coffee Company, speaks of almost losing Starbucks before he ever had it. He had formed a group of investors to buy Starbucks, then just a couple of coffee stores and roasting plant, but in the eleventh hour of the deal one investor attempted to change the agreement by reducing Schultz's influence and control. The investor said, "If you don't take this deal, you'll never work again in this town. You'll never raise another dollar. You'll be dog-meat." Schultz responded, "It's my idea! I brought it to you, and your not taking it away. We will raise the money, with or without you."¹ When the meeting ended Schultz stepped into the lobby and immediately began to cry. Bill Gates Sr., who was also in the meeting, immediately approached Schultz to communicate his being aghast at the behavior of the investor and reassured him that everything was going to turn out fine. Gates Sr. was right. Howard did get the capital elsewhere and the opportunity to pursue his dream. In Schultz' emotional state Gates could have easily left him be. But he didn't. Schultz could have left that meeting feeling alone, defeated and full of self-doubt. But he didn't.

In as much as encouragement works for you, misdirected encouragement can work against you. Perhaps the most common faux pa managerial leaders make is bragging about the tools not the people operating the tools. Listen to the communication in your organization and count the times an inanimate object gets kudos. "Isn't it amazing what computers

can do?" "You mean to tell me that the copier finished the job that fast!" "Our new CAD system is going to put us on the map." "This jet flies itself." Think about it. A computer is not going to work harder for you, be eager to take more responsibility or mentor another employee. In fact, a well-documented downside of technological advancement is that people feel in competition with machines. The more people get the credit, the more technology will work for you.

Inauthentic encouragement hits home. Literally. I remember an episode when my eleven year-old insisted that I listen to a poem he wrote. Unfortunately it is all too common for my attention to be diverted elsewhere (i.e. the newspaper, the web, the game, etc.). I consented to listen and then commenced to be distracted. Upon completion of the prose, Chance asked what I thought, and I responded with glowing remarks. I was then treated to a sobering lesson, "Dad I'd rather you not say anything than to not mean what you say." Ouch. Unfortunately it is all too common for a word of encouragement to be dismissed because of an inauthentic source.

I once had a client who's company was the subject of 'hostile takeover' rumors. I had been brought in to help launch a company-wide 'empowerment' program. I admired that in light of a potential 'takeover', the CEO was committed to the future welfare of his people and his company and decided to continue our work despite speculation that it would be for not. He contended that at worst the knowledge his employees gained would benefit their careers and at best his company would emerge stronger and better. Our goal was to formalize the empowerment initiative at their annual meeting. The theme for our weekend was 'Creating A Culture of Ascension.' The day before the annual meeting he got word that his company had been taken over. He chose to go forward with our elaborate training weekend (five star resort, whale watching, golfing, fishing, etc.). On our first day during the morning session the topic of sharing knowledge surfaced. A major flaw in their organizational structure had created an environment in which divisions hoarded information and consequently jeopardized potential sales. The question was raised, "how serious

are we about sharing information?" The CEO was sitting in the front row and turned completely around to respond to his employee, "very serious", he replied. "Are the rumors that we are getting taken over true?" pressed the nervous voice from the back row. I glanced down at the CEO and he stood and moved toward the podium where I was standing. I stepped back as he gripped the edges of the lectern and responded to his colleague's question, "Yes it is true. I do not want to mislead you in any way. We have been taken over by our biggest competitor and I am not certain about the security of any of our jobs. I wanted to proceed with this event because I felt it would be transferable and helpful to your careers." He went on to commend them for their professionalism and commitment. Throughout the weekend I continued to be amazed at the warm response of his colleagues, both to him and to the training event. His encouragement was not laced with platitudes and 'better days ahead' posturing. His honesty and forthrightness in some strange way was encouraging.

Radical change requires the role of an encourager and there is not a person better suited for the adventure than you. So get out there and keep the wolves away.

Self-work

1. Follow through with intentions to encourage others.
2. Make a mental note of where your encouragement is directed.
3. Identify ways in which others encourage you.

¹ Schultz, Howard, and Dori Jones Yang. *Pour Your Heart Into It*. New York, NY: Hyperion, 1997

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