

Caring: The Key to Connection

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You will never inspire the hearts and minds of others without a deep, genuine appreciation for the talent, commitment, and value that others can bring to your team. When you get that, your ability to connect with people and their ability to connect with you is multiplied exponentially.

An old friend of mine, Arturo, led a team of talented professionals who consistently outperformed their competition, despite less than optimum circumstances and resources. In addition, he was able to retain staff in an industry where high performers received new opportunities weekly. I asked Arturo his secret for keeping his team together and performing. His response was simultaneously simple in concept and challenging in application. He said, "I just love them. I love them when they do things right, and I love them when they do things wrong. Every day, I just love them."

The choice of words may appear out of place in a business environment, but the sentiment is unmistakable. Arturo genuinely cared about his team, and it showed through his communication and actions.

Here are three ideas to help you increase your leadership influence by showing that you care:

1) Build people up - don't tear them down.

Leaders who appreciate the commitment of others are masters at helping them grow and improve. They know that the success of their team is the true indication of their abilities. Every performance conversation

is focused on creating competence and instilling confidence. Strengths are identified early and reinforced often because leveraging the things you do well is the quickest path to future improvement. Development opportunities are discussed as ways to help others succeed rather than focusing on things done wrong for which someone must be punished. Keep in mind, every conversation and interaction a leader has with others serves to either to encourage their commitment and passion or to drain it. The leaders who care are always focused on helping others succeed.

2) Ask and listen.

Despite the simplicity of this concept, leaders get it wrong on a regular basis. They ask questions even though their mind is already made up about a course of action. They discount the feedback they receive as irrelevant rather than listening and trying to understand the true message and motivation behind it. Staring blankly and nodding your head in agreement without making genuine eye contact clearly leaves the listener doubting your sincerity.

People feel appreciated when they feel valued. Being valued is sign that others care about you, and nothing demonstrates that more than when you ask them for their opinion and then really listen to their ideas.

3) Be interested in your employees as people.

Maintaining an appropriate level of separation can be important for those in a position of authority. But that doesn't mean that you can't be interested in people. The people you influence have lives

away from the work and volunteer roles in which you know them. Acknowledge that and take the time to learn about them. Doing so humanizes you as a leader, and more important, it provides a window into the factors that affect and motivate them.

Ross Perot, founder of the company Electronic Data Systems and a former U.S. Presidential candidate, once told me that managers in his companies were expected to know what was going on in the lives of their staff. If someone had a child in the hospital, the expectation was that the manager would be there to ensure that their direct report's family received the same level of attention and treatment as they would want for their own family. That is really showing an interest.

An old cliché says that, "people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." It is easy to disregard the idioms of the past as irrelevant today. However, Ross Perot, the leader of large companies, and Arturo, the leader of a small team, both know that doing so would be a mistake.

The importance of connecting with people never changes, and as a leader, that connection is a key element in your ultimate success.

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