

MOVING AHEAD

MANAGEMENT INSIGHTS FOR BUSINESS SUCCESS

Amp-Up Your Leadership: Power Up Your Team

By Stefanie Smith

In Part II of our “Amp-Up Your Leadership” series, Stefanie Smith (with a little inspiration from Albert Einstein) shifts the emphasis from individual leadership development to strategies that will enhance the performance of your team.

Albert Einstein is famous for his theorem $E=mc^2$ which explains how energy can be converted into matter and matter transformed into energy. The amount of energy produced (E) equals mass (m) multiplied by the speed of light (c) squared. But did you know Einstein’s brilliance extended way beyond the molecular level? He also wrote:

“All that is valuable in human society depends upon the opportunity for development accorded the individual.”

When it comes to the impact of business leadership on individual development and output, we can reframe Einstein’s famous formula $E=mc^2$ as: Energy = magnetism multiplied by collective confidence.

As a leader, your team’s level of energy and enthusiasm stems directly from both your magnetism - “the power and ability to attract or influence others” - and the collective confidence you and your team project. Whether you lead engineers, marketers or accountants, you can power them up by adopting the following strategies:

1. Keep your head up and your gaze ahead.

Ultimately, leadership happens between your ears. First, you must see yourself as having what it takes to succeed. Second, you must adopt a physical presence that reflects mental self-assurance. Your team looks to you for signals. Your image and abilities directly affect their sense of job security. “Walking the talk” is more than a figure of speech: your facial expressions, body language, posture and speaking style all contribute to the impression you make. So keep your shoulders back and your head up. You never know who is watching.

My first recognition of myself as a leader came from a most unlikely source. While studying for my MBA, I participated in an exchange program at London Business School. One day, as I was walking down the dormitory hallway towards my tiny cubicle of a room, an elderly maid overheard me in a conversation with some classmates. She nodded toward me, and in a thick Cockney accent straight out of *My Fair Lady*

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observed, “That little one looks like she’s in charge, she does!” At 4’8” tall, it obviously wasn’t my physical stature that impressed her. But at that moment, some combination of my demeanor and an observer’s perspective provided a confidence boost I’ll never forget.

2. Empower your people.

Do your team members feel comfortable asking questions and making decisions on their own? Empowerment can be either a virtuous or vicious cycle: if you treat people as if they can make their own decisions, they start believing it; if you treat people as if they can’t make decisions, they start believing it.

I’ll illustrate the point with another personal story. While in college, I interned at the United Nations. On my very first day, the department head asked me to reorganize three sets of bookshelves. At the idealistic age of 19, I couldn’t hide my disappointment at being assigned what I considered a lowly task. But I’ll never forget his response: “Oh, I’m not asking you to clean up the shelves. Anyone can do that. I want you to eliminate the disorder forever. We need a better system so our staff can quickly find the critical policy and legal resources they need, and put them back in the same place. Come by with ideas and questions when you’re ready.”

When I hesitated, still dubious, he added, “Good management is not telling people what to do. It is getting them to do the right thing spontaneously.” With that straightforward remark, he set forth standards we can model for projects of any scale.

3. Ensure “passive progress” continues when you step away.

Whether you’re out of the office for lunch or out of the country for a conference, is your team prepared to move forward without you? Or, do you need the validation of saying, “Nothing gets done if I’m not there.”?

If you create an environment where progress continues in your absence, imagine the freedom and energy it will afford you. When you walk in the door and an assistant has proactively drafted a letter on your behalf, or a task force has met and is ready to present you with their recommendations, you gain three benefits. First, you save time. Second, you can focus your talents on more strategic, executive-level tasks. Third, and perhaps most powerfully, you are in a position to reward independent thought and effort, which increases employee confidence, which in turn generates higher performance.

4. Know exactly what is happening at all times.

You may be wondering how you can reconcile stepping away with maintaining control. It all boils down to effective communication - by phone, e-mail, or carrier pigeon, if necessary. Everyone who reports to you should have complete trust that you will be receptive if they reach out for guidance. If you know your people will contact you if a problem arises, you can rest assured everything is on track if you don’t hear from them. Timely and pre-emptive written updates mean fewer surprises and faster intervention when inevitably someone or something goes down the wrong path.

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5. Enhance professional development with hands-on learning.

When I was a Girl Scout, our scout leaders repeated the axiom, “A Girl Scout always leaves a campsite cleaner than she found it.” Adapted for business leaders that translates to, “Always leave people with higher-level skills than when you found them.”

Link professional development initiatives to pertinent business situations. Keeping it real justifies your close involvement and amplifies your team’s sense of value and motivation. They’ll appreciate that you consider them worth the investment and you will soon be able to delegate additional tasks and responsibilities - a genuine win/win.

6. Nurture team pride.

The members of your team will feel proud if they are part of an effort and a group with a superb reputation based on measurable quality and results. Remind them often exactly why you are proud to work with them, especially on those days when things aren’t going perfectly. I’m not suggesting you become a “soft” leader. You can’t expect stellar results if you don’t set high, attainable standards. Offer sincere recognition and ongoing rewards to create gratifying memories associated with specific milestones. Promoting collective self-esteem allows you to be both tough and popular.

An important distinction between “pride” and “arrogance” is that arrogance is an overbearing or offensive distortion of pride. While too much of a good thing is not necessarily better, don’t let that deter you from a worthy goal.

Final Thoughts

Even if you don’t directly lead a group, I hope you’ll think about how you can use the leadership practices described here. Leadership is first and foremost a dedication to evoking the best in others. You may be a leader with your peers, friends or clients.

To sum up: Channel your leadership magnetism into attaining the highest possible levels of achievement, pride, open communication, respect, awareness and empowerment. While the energy unleashed may not reach atomic proportions, it will gratify and enrich everyone involved in the transformation. As you go on to research and experiment to amp-up your leadership abilities and power up your team, let these quotes from Albert Einstein reinforce your own courage and confidence:

“A person who never made a mistake never tried anything new.”

“Imagination is more important than knowledge.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Stefanie Smith leads Stratex (www.StratexConsulting.com), an executive consulting and coaching firm based in Manhattan. She provides customized group workshops and private coaching programs to guide corporate and nonprofit executives and their teams to reach the next performance level. In addition to writing for the American Management Association, she writes a blog www.CoachStef.com offering tips and techniques on career advancement and empowerment.