

To Help Others Develop, Start With Yourself

Great leaders encourage leadership development by openly developing themselves.

by Marshall Goldsmith

Listen to what General Mills CEO Steve Sanger recently told 90 of his colleagues: „As you all know, last year my team told me that I needed to do a better job of coaching my direct reports. I just reviewed my 360-degree feedback. I have been working on becoming a better coach for the past year or so. I'm still not doing quite as well as I want, but I'm getting a lot better. My coworkers have been helping me improve. Another thing that I feel good about is the fact that my scores on ‚effectively responds to feedback‘ are so high this year.“

While listening to Steve speak so openly to coworkers about his efforts to develop himself as a leader, I realized how much the world has changed. Twenty years ago, few CEOs received feedback from their colleagues. Even fe-

wer candidly discussed that feedback and their personal developmental plans. Today, many of the world's most respected chief executives are setting a positive example by opening up, striving continually to develop themselves as leaders. In fact, organizations that do the best job of cranking out leaders tend to have CEOs like Steve Sanger who are directly and actively involved in leadership development. That has certainly been my experience. This has also been confirmed by a recently completed research project led by Marc Efron at Hewitt Associates, one of the largest HR consulting firms. Hewitt and Chief Executive magazine put General Mills on their latest list of the top-20 companies for leaders, among such familiar names as IBM and General Electric.

Hewitt found that these organizations tend to more actively manage their talent. They put lots of focus on identifying high-potential people, better differentiate compensation, serve up the right kinds of development opportunities, and closely watch turnover. But crucial to all these efforts were CEO support and involvement.

No question, one of the best ways top executives can get their leaders to improve is to work on improving themselves. Leading by example can mean a lot more than leading by public-relations hype.

Michael Dell, whose company made the Hewitt list, is a perfect example. As one of the most successful leaders in business history, he could easily have an attitude that says, „I am Michael Dell and you aren't! I don't really need to work on developing myself.“ Michael, however, has the opposite approach. He has done an amazing job of sincerely discussing his personal challenges with leaders across the company. He is a living case study from whom everyone at Dell is learning. His leadership example makes it hard for any leader to act arrogant or to communicate that he or she has nothing to improve upon.

Johnson & Johnson, tied for first on the top-20 list, has successfully involved its executives in leadership development. Its CEOs, formerly Ralph Larsen and now Bill Weldon, and top executive team regularly participate in a variety of leadership-building activities. Having a dialogue with the CEO about his business challenges and developmental needs makes it a lot easier for employees to discuss their own business challenges and developmental needs.

Executive candor can even help turn around a troubled company. Consider Northrop Grumman, the aerospace defense contractor. CEO Kent Kresa inherited a company that had a poor reputation for integrity, a battered stock price, and an unfortunate reputation as one of the least-

admired companies in its industry. His leadership team reversed the company's poor image and engineered an amazing turnaround – ultimately becoming the Forbes' most-admired company. From the beginning of the process, Kent led by example. He communicated clear expectations for ethics, values, and behavior. He made sure that he was evaluated by the same standards that he set for everyone else. He consistently reached out to coworkers. He didn't just work to develop his leaders--he created an environment in which the company's leaders were working to develop him.

Unfortunately, in the same way that CEO support and involvement can help companies nurture leaders, CEO arrogance can have the opposite effect. When the boss acts like a little god and tells everyone else they need to improve, that behavior can be copied at every level of management. Every level then points out how the level below it needs to change. The end result: No one gets much better.

The principle of leadership development by personal example doesn't apply just to CEOs. It applies to all levels of management. All good leaders want their people to grow and develop on the job. Who knows? If we work hard to improve ourselves, we might even encourage the people around us to do the same thing.

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