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Is Your Leadership Style One Size Fits None?

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What if you walked into your favourite coffee shop one day and discovered that you couldn't order your usual "customised" coffee? You'd be served caffeinated black coffee or nothing at all. Many industry leaders recognise that their customers are demanding customised experiences; after all, you can customise everything from your computer to your morning cup of coffee. But what about the frontline employees providing these customised experiences? Should their leaders expect them to perform their work in a "black coffee" world, with each employee being treated exactly like the one next to him? In our increasingly customised world, it should be no surprise that employees might expect customised approaches from their leaders. A onesize-fits-all approach doesn't work any better in leadership than it does with serving coffee to a Starbucks generation.

As a leader, the payoff to customising your style to each employee is a more motivated and engaged workforce. "But," you're thinking, "creating an individual approach to each employee is time consuming! Where is this supposed to fit into my schedule?"

Start With the Constant

While working to customise your approach to employees' styles, there should always be one constant in the equation. The organisation's expectations and standards should be clear and unwavering to everyone. All employees should be working toward the same clearly communicated goals.

Those standards and goals should also be built into job descriptions, new employee orientation and regular evaluations. At all stages of their employment, employees will reconnect with these standards and be held accountable to them.

Using Different Gifts to Achieve the Same Goal

Once all employees know they are headed in the same direction toward the same goal, it's time to get personal and discover what gifts each of them bring to the journey. Some employees are natural "people" people — they are always there with a warm greeting and an encouraging word. Some are sticklers for detail who won't let a process deviate off-track, and some are innovators who come up with creative new ways to achieve your goals.

All of these gifts can be useful in living up to the organisation's standards; it's up to the leader to pay attention to each employee's gifts and help them to use those gifts to the greatest benefit.

What Makes Them Tick?

In order to truly motivate employees, you have to understand what's most important to them and what inspires them to go above and beyond. Successful leaders know that engaging and retaining talented employees takes more than just assigning tasks and monitoring their completion.

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What motivates you may not be the same for your employees. It's important to find out what causes your employees to join the organisation and what keeps them present and engaged. Some leaders sit down with their employees for periodic "check-ins" to find out what motivates them. Others ask via employee surveys. One key to employee motivation and engagement is to ask, not assume. For instance, if you know that an employee feels most connected and productive if he feels free to approach you with questions, then make sure you let that person know when and how to contact you with questions.

Another key to employee engagement is to see it as a process. People change over time, and with changes in circumstances come changes in motivation or attitude toward work.

Keeping Them on Track

Just as you can observe distinct strengths in each of your employees, you can also observe where they're likely to get off track. The "people person" mentioned earlier is great with greeting customers and making them feel welcome. However, a couple of extra minutes spent enthusiastically commenting on the customer's new outfit may mean that a phone is left ringing too long or another customer is kept waiting a few extra minutes. Leading this type of person requires gently coaching them to use their gifts but to stay on task. It's important to help the employee see that you appreciate her gifts, yet offer guidance to keep things on track. On the flip side, you may have someone who is a stickler for efficiency who wants to move on to the next call as efficiently as possible. The outcome is that she seems abrupt. In this case, you want to recognise her for her efficiency and encourage her to slow down enough to interject warmth and concern into the conversation.

Successful leaders know that treating each employee as an important individual is worth the time and investment. Those leaders who take the time to observe, develop, and reward their employees' natural gifts are rewarded themselves with a group of employees who are committed to helping the organisation live its mission, vision, values, and brand promise.

© 2010 Kristin Baird - Nurse, author, consultant and speaker Kristin Baird, "Healthcare's Customer Service Guru," leads a group of healthcare innovators that help hospitals and medical practices to transform culture and shape the patient experience. The Baird Group offers culture assessment/diagnosis, mystery shopping, leadership development, employee engagement, targeted service strategies and customised training. You can reach Baird at www.baird-group.com 1-866-686-7672 or by emailing info@baird-group.com

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