

# Cornerstones of Outstanding Leadership

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by Gwen Hughes, RHIA

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During my 28 years in the healthcare industry, I have had the good fortune to work for a couple of truly outstanding leaders. Although I recognized and attempted to emulate some of the management techniques used by these outstanding individuals, I didn't truly appreciate how skilled they were until I worked for less effective leaders with whom their performance could be compared. Following are some of the characteristics and management tools that made these leaders so effective:

**Loved their work.** Anyone can do a good job. But the truly outstanding leaders to whom I reported loved their work. They cared enough to invest their lives, to stick it out during the tough times, and to give their best. For them, work was fun and they made it fun for others. Their love of the organization, its customers, and their work inspired and motivated others to give their best. Their positive spirit was contagious.

**Honed their communication skills.** These outstanding leaders were skilled communicators who used clear, concise, uplifting, and compelling language to outline or explain their vision of the organization. They communicated in a way that created enthusiasm and motivated others to help them realize their dreams.

**Recognized the importance of communication.** At one organization, managers met for 45 minutes each Monday morning to share anything others should know for the week ahead. Later that day, a newsletter summarizing the information collected during the management team meeting was distributed to all staff members.

**Were skilled writers.** Each document they originated was clear, concise, and precise. They understood the problems that could be caused by miscommunication so were careful and exact when expressing themselves on paper.

**Made expectations clear.** These leaders invited the managers to meet and develop the organization's goals and objectives for the coming year. At the end of these sessions, each manager walked away understanding the big picture, how they could contribute to it, and with a commitment to achieving the goals and objectives to which they had agreed.

**Measured performance.** After making their expectations clear, these managers monitored performance to make sure they got what they expected. Progress toward meeting organizational, departmental, and individual objectives was monitored and measured. Organizational results were published and distributed to all staff and customers.

**Looked for the good.** The best leaders to whom I reported believed that people were their most valuable resource. They looked for the good in each staff member. They instructed, encouraged, and helped staff develop their talents.

On many occasions, I was asked to take on a task or function I'd never performed before. When I experienced self-doubt, I had only to remind myself that I believed in this particular leader, and that if he or she thought I could do a particular job, I probably could.

When these leaders expressed their appreciation, it was immediate, warm, and sincere. They usually verbalized the specific behavior they appreciated, how it made them feel, and encouraged similar behavior in the future. When they recognized performance publicly, they did so in a way that others would not feel criticized. They also encouraged staff to respect and recognize each other.

In a state-operated organization where I worked, there was no money for recognition or rewards. The CEO had eight children and his personal funds were limited. To recognize staff, he developed the "Golden Banana Award." Every week, he collected memos submitted by staff members recognizing outstanding behavior on the part of other staff members. Each staff member recognized was invited to attend the next management team meeting. Then, during the meeting, the CEO:

- read aloud each of the memos received
- added a personal comment about why he appreciated the behavior exhibited
- shook the hand of the individual recognized
- presented the individual with an actual banana
- gave him or her the original memo on which he had added a word of appreciation and affixed a star or banana sticker

Award recipients and their achievements were included in the weekly newsletter distributed to all staff. It sounds silly, doesn't it? Yet, 20 years later, I still keep a few of those notes with the words of appreciation, the encouragement, and the silly stickers.

As author George Matthew Adams once said, "Encouragement is oxygen to the soul. There are high spots in all of our lives and most of them have come about through encouragement from someone else. I don't care how great, how famous or successful a man or woman may be, each hungers for applause."

**Criticized constructively.** The same outstanding leaders who recognized the importance of expressing appreciation also recognized the need to provide constructive criticism. They understood that without it, an individual would miss out on opportunities to grow and better serve the organization.

When expressing criticism, these leaders asked questions and listened to the answers rather than rushing to judgment. They asked the staff member if and how they might have handled the situation better. They had these conversations immediately and privately. When the staff member was unable to recognize how they might have done something better, they pointed out the specific behavior that was incorrect, how that behavior made the leader feel, and what behavior they wanted to see in the future. They mixed praise with criticism, but were careful that criticism didn't always follow praise.

A CEO to whom I once reported needed to provide me with some constructive criticism. He asked me about a particular situation and I described the events and the actions I had taken, and added that if I had known then what I learned later, I would have handled the situation differently. The CEO responded by saying that that was all he wanted to know. Only as I walked down the hall after leaving his office did I realize that I had been reprimanded. I was astounded that he worded the conversation so that he didn't even have to criticize me: I pointed out my own shortcomings and what I should have done. It was so painless, yet so effective, that I made it a point to use this technique whenever possible with my own staff.

**Set a tone of openness.** These leaders were open to their staff's ideas. When the leaders presented ideas, they were open to counterproposals. If you had a difference of opinion, they responded rather than reacted. They had a sense of humor about themselves and communicated personal fallibility.

Further, when these individuals were wrong, they acknowledged it. Their apologies included the specific offense, words of regret, thanks for calling the matter to their attention, and a statement as to what they had or would do to rectify the situation.

**They cared.** "People don't care how much you know; until they know how much you care...about them," author Zig Ziglar says. My outstanding managers cared and let the staff know it. They took the time to ask about their staff's family or some activity or project of interest to them and they really listened to your reply. They took the time to get to know their staff. When a staff member experienced some type of personal misfortune such as a divorce or death in the family, these managers took the time to acknowledge the burden the staff member must feel, offered to help in specific ways, and offered their condolences in the form of sympathy, thoughts, prayers, affection, or good wishes.

These individuals cared about us and we cared about them. They were people we could look up to who didn't look down on us. I owe my success as a manager to those who showed me the right way to manage. I managed more effectively, and I know I helped others grow.

## References

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## Achieving Leadership Excellence

- Love your work. If you can't, change your situation.
- Make a point of improving your communication skills. Listen and attempt to emulate outstanding oral communicators. Join Toast Masters.
- Work on your written communication. Craft and proofread each written document you generate. Make sure what you write is clear, concise, and unlikely to be misunderstood. If you have difficulty writing, consider taking an English class or technical writing course.
- Consider your vision for the future. Learn to articulate your dream in a way that excites and motivates others. Repeat your vision often. Eventually, others will join your parade.
- Develop shared goals and objectives with staff.
- Measure what's important.
- As goals and objectives are achieved, celebrate the successes.
- Get to know your staff.
- Instruct to make your staff more successful.
- Encourage others. Let them know their contribution is appreciated.
- Ask questions before rushing to judgment. Respond rather than react. Learn how to criticize behavior constructively.
- Listen, listen, listen.
- Be open to criticism and the opinions and ideas of others.
- Laugh.

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