

The Five People Challenges to Master

© 2012 Brad Lebo

brad.lebo@vitalgrowthllc.com

I've come to rely on "top five" lists for just about everything. Perhaps too much. On the other hand, the top five of anything doesn't completely overwhelm my ability to keep all of them in mind. Like with juggling, five balls in the air is a lot easier to manage than ten.

So, here are the top five people challenges to master if you want to be successful as a leader or manager in business:

Challenge One: Understanding yourself well enough to know your values. Values influence every decision you make and the resulting actions. What you believe is important or valuable will determine how you interact with others including peers, employees, and customers, as well as determine how you react to lapses in effort, integrity and judgment.

Being able to clearly define and communicate your values will guide and influence your own behavior and the behavior of others in the organization. Hiring the "right people" is impossible without clarity about values. Deciding whom to reward or punish is nearly impossible without knowing your values.

If you are confused about your values, you will suffer the same fate as anyone who tries to build a house on sand. Everything shifts when pushed and nobody can be sure of what's happening next.

Challenge Two: Communicating clearly. There are many ideas and instructions that a business leader needs to communicate on any given day. For the most part, business leaders and managers have a track record of success in communicating clearly. There are several typical stumbling blocks, however.

The first stumbling block is inconsistency. This is when communication happens sometimes but not always, for no reason other than the communication priority got bumped down a notch. The solution to this stumbling block is relatively easy: Meet frequently with peers and direct reports and give top priority to the meetings. Nothing like a regularly scheduled (daily) meeting to keep communication channels wide open.

The second stumbling block is fear. I'm referring to fear of saying something that causes someone else to take offense and yell, storm out of a meeting, sulk, or worse. Fear is what keeps most of us from confronting and holding others truly accountable for behavior that we are confident is a problem.

Clarity in communication is often the first casualty of this kind of fear, closely followed by lost time and energy spent crafting communication that does not cause offense. The solution to this stumbling block is relatively hard, and it's beyond the scope of this article. Interested readers should refer to *Crucial Conversations* by Patterson, Grenny, McMillan and Switzler, or *Fierce Conversations* by Susan Scott, for more information.

The third stumbling block is selfishness. Let's face it, everyone listens a little better and sometimes a lot better if their own interests are attended to. Think of the contrast between hearing, "If we reach our goal this year, I'll be able to get that boat I've always wanted," and "If we reach our goal this year, every one of you who contributes to our success will get a bonus."

The solution to this stumbling block is to communicate in a way that accounts for the interests of your audience. People are motivated by a broad range of interests. For some it will be money. For others it will be the opportunity to help others. Know your audience's motivating interests and get everyone's attention by appealing to them. Do it with integrity, finding the way that is genuine and win-win rather than manipulative and win-lose.

Challenge Three: Assessing people for their talent, motivation and values. This includes current employees and those who will be hired. Assessing people in an organization is a task that benefits from having a process. A complete process will include features such as: measuring performance against expectations, measuring "fit" with company values, and providing feedback to redirect and develop individuals.

The dark side of this process is that some people will need to be redeployed or let go...freeing up their future.

Done well, getting the right people in the right positions—through assessment, redirection, development and hiring—goes a long way toward taking care of other people challenges such as employee retention and alignment behind company priorities.

Challenge Four: Confronting problem behavior and holding others truly accountable. This challenge is mentioned above in the section on communicating clearly, where it's a kind of sub-challenge. In my opinion it still deserves a headline of its own because of its importance.

Most leaders and managers struggle to effectively confront problem behavior. It is a skill that, if learned and practiced, can make a profound difference in the performance of any organization. Please see the books mentioned above for more information.

Challenge Five: Leveraging a team of people. With few exceptions, a team of individuals working well together typically outperforms even the most talented individual. Teams

have the advantage of multiple minds and broader experience.

But, we all know dysfunctional teams that cannot outperform individuals working alone. Such teams do not leverage the expertise and perspective inherent in a team.

Learning how to grow and nurture a functional team to leverage its potential is one of the most important challenges any business leader can undertake. This includes overcoming the potential dysfunctions of a team (as identified by Patrick Lencioni in *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*) as well as learning how to assimilate new team members.

The good news is that it's not that hard to do the things Lencioni and others like him suggest. And, given the state of most teams, any improvement can bring dramatically positive results.

The bad news is that like all the other challenges mentioned, it takes conscious effort and the discipline to keep the effort going. As one CEO recently admitted, "I've got to get better at managing people. It's the only way my company can grow."

Hopefully, you now have a better idea of what you can get better at.