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INTERACTION

STEPPING INTO LEADERSHIP

Interaction Opinion

Congratulations!

As you step into management for the first time, you often receive praise. You have arrived. Perhaps many would say that you have worked hard to get here. And, I would not doubt it. Let's face it, all those years of dedication, having to follow directions when you can't help feel you would do it better. Well, now is your chance as you step up to a role of leadership.

When a child takes their first steps, we can feel a great sense of joy. Yet, as a parent, there is also that realisation that a world of trouble is about to begin. The child has reached a new level of freedom. They can move faster, reach different places and cause plenty of heartaches.

Leadership can often seem like an arrival, that rite of passage that can often appear ideal. This moment is like those first few steps. The experience will require a dramatic shift in how you behave. The expectations will change; some of these are your own while others are external. Are you prepared for a departure from the normal?

There are some critical skills that a leader needs to develop if they are to enjoy the success they hope to have. No one arrives into a leadership role with the idea that they want to stuff things up. OK, so I admit that might be a generalisation, but it is also reasonably safe. Given the amount of attention that leaders get in society, it suggests we have a high expectation that they will provide some sense of security for our future.

The arrival of a new CEO sparks those water cooler conversations about what this person will change. It might be a sense of excitement about the future. It is often caution and a 'let's wait and see' assessment—regardless of what others may be thinking, your first steps into leadership present a learning opportunity.

So, an excellent question to consider as you start this learning journey is, "How am I creating the conditions for success?" The challenge here is to step up and make things work; this does not mean it all falls onto you. Attempting to sit back and wait is not the right approach either. Success requires a proactive approach, which takes guts because it can often present you with a range of risks.

A key consideration to how you lead is to analyse how daily actions contribute to the overall strategic vision and vice-versa. Some things you may like to consider include:

1. **Creating a culture of enquiry**

A culture of enquiry is when your team is approaching their problems with the mindset of an anthropologist. They are curious about past processes and seek to identify how this is creating a future. Your role is to guide the team in the discovery of their abilities, values and dreams. Helping them to understand the purpose behind their work – this motivates.

2. **Appreciate that there is a psychological shift in your thinking and that this shift is taxing**

I don't remember my first steps as a small child. I can, however, imagine that my thinking needed to change. As a leader, you are standing in a new place; things will look different, challenging how you think. There is essentially a cognitive demand that will drain you of your energy. Carve out time in your diary for reflection and calibrate your energy. This is not just a matter of more coffee or that sugar hit – although these may help. You need to develop a habit that helps centre you.

3. **Identify the challenge early, don't wait for something to go wrong before you decide to learn the lesson.**

Leadership is a challenge. The challenges may vary depending on the context. We know this just by looking at the many failed leaders over history. The skill is to identify the challenge early and start the process of learning. If you don't seek out the lessons each day, you end up learning the hard way when things go wrong. There is no trophy for doing it the hard way!

There is a change in identity that occurs. Anytime we shift our perspective, we invite the possibility of changing what we know to be true. Understand that past experiences shape your identity, and if you allow it, this past is a place you will stay.

4. **Accept that you are learning to lead; this is not someone else's responsibility.**

Stepping into leadership is not the end game; it is the start of a rich learning journey. There is a reward in taking courage and being authentic about what you do and don't know. There is courage in admitting that you need to learn and take the responsibility to resource yourself with the skills and knowledge for success. Read some of the latest leadership books, seek out training, mentoring or coaching. Do anything but sit there and think it will just happen.

Being ready to learn is about identifying gaps. Perhaps this involves a SWOT analysis. It also requires a sense of vulnerability and being authentic. The skill is not to hide from weakness but to be brave and face the challenge. Remember that you are modelling how you respond to gaps in understanding, skills or knowledge. Your staff sees your behaviour.

Leading takes courage to intentionally prioritise the things that align with your personal, organisational, and societal philosophy. Examining these values is a challenge as you are likely to find a misalignment. When that happens, there is discomfort, and this invites you to a new place of discovery.

Simply knowing that leading is risky can help prepare for the mental and emotional toll ahead. Realising there is a toll means we can then take action, find ways to build resilience. Bringing your team into the decision-making process can share the load.

Finally, like a child taking their first steps, feedback on your progress is not designed to stop you from walking. Being open to constructive feedback is your most powerful learning tool. You can model this by learning to provide constructive input into your team's performance. And even more powerfully, to respond in a positive way when they are providing you with the constructive feedback you need. Remember those first steps because they will serve you well into the future.