

9 Vital Leadership Behaviors That Boost Employee Productivity

by Joe Folkman

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Extraordinary leaders have a significant impact on the job satisfaction, productivity, and commitment of their direct reports.

During times of economic trouble, it is common to see layoffs, furloughs, pay cuts, and budget reduction. Morale is often low among the employees who are fortunate enough to retain their jobs. Productivity suffers, as well as employee satisfaction with their jobs and organization. Some lose hope, and many lose faith in the traditional model of capi-

talism. It's times like these that many executives and management personnel find a place to hide until the storm blows over, avoiding dealing with profit losses and confrontations with employees. However, if leaders do just the opposite and focus on their own leadership effectiveness, employee satisfaction and commitment can be increased, thereby

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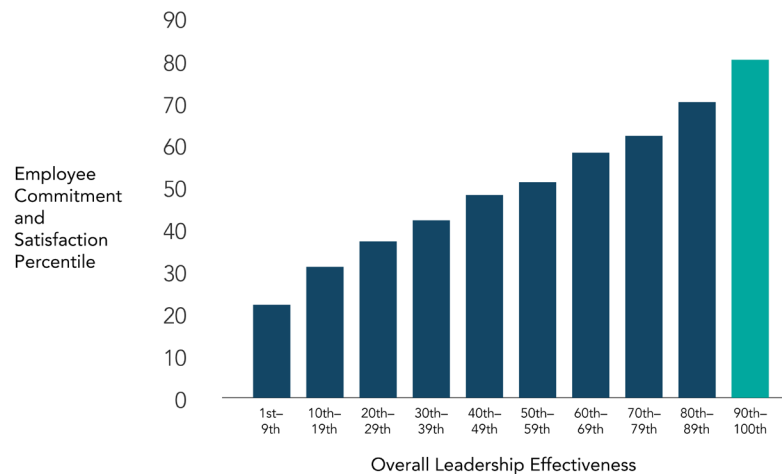
increasing productivity and profitability even in difficult times.

To determine the effect leaders have on the job satisfaction and commitment of their direct reports, Zenger Folkman gathered data from nearly 100,000 direct reports in hundreds of different organizations. Each direct report rated the effectiveness of their immediate manager and the level of satisfaction/commitment each had with the organization.

The Study

The effectiveness of leaders was assessed by 49 behavioral items which evaluated 16 leadership competencies. The employee satisfaction/commitment index measured the extent to which employees were satisfied with the organization, their confidence in the organization, their commitment to stay, and to go the extra mile. By collecting the combined dataset of these leadership behaviors and the levels of employee satisfaction/commitment, it became possible to isolate the top leadership behaviors that

Fig. 1 – Leadership Effectiveness vs. Employee Commitment and Satisfaction



30,661 Leaders Across Multiple Industries

were most influential in creating a satisfied employee who is highly committed. By identifying a few critical dimensions, leaders can more easily focus on the actions that will have the greatest impact on business results.

The Findings

After examining the myriad of factors that influence employee satisfaction and commitment, one has consistently been shown to provide the most impact: the leadership effectiveness of employees' immediate manager.

As shown in Figure 1, the best leaders have employees at the 75th percentile of satisfaction/commitment while the worst leaders have employees at the 26th percentile.

This study validates the notion that the quickest and most reliable way of increasing employee satisfaction and commitment is to provide employees with a more effective leader.

Which leadership behaviors have the greatest impact?

Evidence shows that improving any leadership behavior will have a positive impact on employee satisfaction/commitment, but some changes have more impact than others. Through our research we have identified the nine behaviors that, if improved, will have the greatest impact on employee satisfaction/commitment.

1. Inspire and Motivate Others

Leaders who are effective at inspiring and motivating others have a high level of energy and enthusiasm. They energize their team to achieve difficult goals and increase the level of performance from everyone on the team. Many leaders focus on accomplishing tasks in their job description while forgetting to inspire. This is a mistake. Without inspiration, employees do an adequate job. However, when inspiration is a focus, leaders unlock a level of additional effort and energy that can make the difference between organizational success and failure. The point is every leader needs to find ways to inspire their employees to higher performance.

2. Driving for Results

The drive for results is a critical behavior to success. However, some organizations are all push (drive for results) and no pull (inspiration), which ultimately reduces motivation. Conversely, all pull and no push does not work well either. A healthy balance between the two behaviors is necessary. Leaders who are effective at driving for results are skilled at getting people to stay focused on and stretch for the highest priority goals. They establish high standards of excellence for the work group. Leaders that do this well are not afraid to ask their employees for a higher level of performance and continually remind them of their progress relative to the goal.

3. Strategic Perspective

While the first two behaviors focus on getting activity to occur, the third behavior focuses on the direction of that activity. Leaders who provide their team with a definite sense of direction and purpose tend to have more satisfied and committed employees. These leaders paint a clear perspective between the overall picture and the details of day-to-day

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activities. The most successful leaders are constantly reinforcing where the organization is heading and the key steps that lead to success. Employees need to see how their hard work makes a difference, and how it helps get the organization closer to achieving success.

4. Collaboration

Possibly one of the most common challenges in today's organizations is the lack of collaboration between groups within an organization. One team is competing for the resources or recognition against other teams. Information is not shared, customers are not well-served, and work

frequently gets stalled. This conflict and lack of synergy frustrates and discourages employees. Leaders who promote a high level of cooperation between their work group and other groups create a positive and productive atmosphere in the organization. When leaders demonstrate that they can achieve objectives that require a high level of inter-group cooperation, synergy is created, and every employee enjoys the work experience.

5. Walk the Talk

A key behavior in creating a satisfied and committed workforce is the fundamental skill of being honest and acting with integ-

rity. Leaders need to be role models and set a good example for their work group. Leaders create cynicism and lose trust when they say one thing and do another, such as telling employees that the budget is tight and to curb all expenditures, but then proceed to stay in 5-star hotels and eat in expensive restaurants. Every leader needs to look at their behavior critically and ask the question, "Am I walking my talk?"

6. Trust

Trust can be built or destroyed over time and is built in different ways. Leaders can engender trust by becoming aware of the concerns, aspirations, and circumstances of others. The reality is that we tend to trust our friends more than our enemies. Trust can also be built through knowledge and expertise. People trust leaders with deep expertise and knowledge because they project confidence in their ability to make informed decisions. We further build trust with others through consistency. When leaders are consistent and predictable, others acquire confidence and trust in them. Finally, trust can be built from a leader's rock-solid honesty and integri-

ty. When direct reports know that they would never be told anything that is not 100 percent accurate and factual, they trust that leader. Consistency is the key to building this kind of trust.

7. Develops and Supports Others

When leaders work with employees and push them to develop new skills and abilities, they are building higher levels of employee satisfaction and commitment. Employees who develop new skills become higher performers and more promotable. Effective leaders are thrilled by the success of others. Leaders can promote greater employee development by creating a learning environment in which people are encouraged to learn from mistakes, take the time to analyze their successes, and understand what went well.

8. Building Relationships

Leaders who stay in touch with issues and concerns of individuals in the work group have employees with higher levels of satisfaction and commitment. In the study, these leaders were perceived as being able to balance “getting results”

with a concern for others’ needs. That does not mean that they are not focused on achieving results. Rather they balance individual needs against organizational deadlines and demonstrate that they value the individual. They create strong positive relationships with team members.

9. Courage

The leaders with the highest levels of employee satisfaction and commitment are courageous. They do not shy away from conflicts. They deal with issues head on, and when they see the first signs of problems within their teams, they addressed it directly and candidly. Some leaders assume that conflicts will work themselves out and the problems will simply disappear. They only fool themselves with this kind of thinking. It takes courage to address issues, resolve conflicts, and insist that everyone is accountable.

Next Steps

These nine behaviors have a significant impact on the commitment and satisfaction of employees. After reading through

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the list of nine, most leaders will identify a few that they do well and perhaps one or two that need some improvement. Here is our logic for how to select an area for improvement.

1. Do you have a fatal flaw?

We found that if any of these behaviors were significant weaknesses, it would crater the satisfaction/commitment of a team. Leaders who had one or more of these behaviors as a significant weakness (i.e., at or below the 10th percentile) had employee satisfaction/commitment at the 31st percentile. If you have a fatal flaw in any of these behaviors, your primary efforts should focus on fixing that weakness.

2. Do you have any profound strengths?

If you don't have any fatal flaws, your priority ought to be to develop a profound strength. Leaders who had no profound strengths had employee commitment scores at the 44th percentile. Leaders with only one profound strength had employee satisfaction/commitment scores at the 62nd percentile. Leaders with three

strengths had commitment scores at the 72nd percentile, while leaders with four strengths were at the 77th percentile. The implication is that leaders that do four of these behaviors well had teams with the highest employee satisfaction/commitment.

The key to increasing the satisfaction and commitment of employees is to build a few profound strengths. Start with one. Choose the behavior that you feel would have the greatest impact and start working on building a profound strength.

About Us

Zenger Folkman relentlessly seeks to rise above the inconsistent, and sometimes misleading, nature of popular leadership philosophies and beliefs brought on by opinion. The discipline of leadership and those who pursue it deserve better. Our most valuable asset is the expertise of combining hard data and statistical analysis with logical explanations and actionable application that help individual leaders thrive and organizations succeed.