

Coaching You Straight To The Top!

*Personal Leadership & Business
Transformation*

By

Timothy J. McCarthy, Ph. D.

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Preface

This book is meant to be a coaching guide for all those having sincere interest in personal leadership self-improvement. It takes one on an inner journey to developing critical leadership skill areas that can "make or break" career success and directly improve business performance. It shows how to make significant life changing leadership changes that are not superficial but far-reaching in impact. Not a quick fix, this is a serious developmental process.

The purpose of this book is to take some of the personal insights, self-reflection and exploration that are normally found in an intensive executive coaching process and recreate this experience as much as possible for the reader. The mission is to stimulate and support your efforts to become a better leader in whatever ways you have desire or interest.

Special care has been made to respect the business leader's time by making the style of writing to-the-point and easy to read, eliminating unnecessary theory and abstract discussion. This purposefully reflects what actual face-to-face conversational coaching would be like. Research findings are noted but highlighted only.

The end goal is to give you a gift—something of true personal worth to directly use and apply in your own unique leadership situation. Good luck in this exciting path to personal leadership growth and development. You most certainly will succeed with a little desire and a lot of good work!

Coaching You Straight to the Top!

Have you ever wished you had a coach to help you in trying to become the best leader you can be? Someone to support you and challenge you in your personal leadership development? Far too little emphasis has been placed on the *systematic* individual coaching development of leaders. For example, you have likely been given very little emphasis upon learning the specific competencies and skills of good leadership that would guarantee your success in your job and improve bottom-line financial as well as customer service performance in your area of business responsibility.

Most training seminars typically offer a group classroom format, rather than individual coaching. However, the difference between group training and individual coaching is a distinction of huge importance. And it could be the single most important aspect to whether you achieve the level of career success of which you are truly capable.

Leadership “Skills Coaching” Neglected

Why would you risk falling short of all the success you desire by not getting the intensive coaching in specific skills that are needed to accomplish the highest levels of achievement in any profession. For example, you can bet that a professional sports team will give its players a great deal of one-to-one coaching in their needed skill areas. A baseball team gives its players countless hours of practice under the watchful eyes of a batting coach. The competencies of each player’s swing, fielding, and so on are carefully assessed, problem areas are indicated and coaching advice is prescribed. This happens even in grade school baseball. Yet, why have you not received that same kind of attention to the practice and coaching of your leadership skills?

You have probably already amassed far more practice time and personal coaching in your life for skills in other activities of far less consequence, such as childhood sports and/or music lessons, than you have at being a leader.

So how likely is it you will achieve everything you are really capable of—your highest career aspirations—when you have not received the needed skills practice? What are your chances? Well, research shows that 30-50% of high potential managers “derail,” meaning they end up failing to meet the expectations of others and end up either reaching a premature ceiling level for any further advancement, leave prematurely, or are fired.¹ Ouch, those odds are pretty high!

Specific Skills Needed For Real Change

Research indicates that one of the biggest problems in leadership development and coaching is that in most companies the set of competencies needed to help one become an effective leader are not defined specifically enough in behavioral terms for one to know exactly what to do differently in order to improve.²

However, the coaching model offered here defines specific behavioral skills for critical competencies of exceptional leadership. Subsequently, most of the *9 Core Competencies* of leadership outlined in this model are not new, but are familiar to most. But what is new is how each is defined by very specific, behavioral skills offering a detailed blueprint to follow. The 9 most critical general competencies are broken down into a total of 36 “Specific Action Skills” that include practical personal change techniques, strategy and tools.

The practical experience of coaching is integrated with the best of objective scientific knowledge from research and other experts. These are not “touchy feely” but “hard” skills directly aimed at triggering the key organizational business drivers that fuel the fire for creating an exciting, visionary, successful business culture. Improved customer and financial performance are attained through exercising these skills.

Your Personal Transformation

One quick note before starting this process. Watch out for the phenomenon of self-sabotage which refers to the continued practice of unhelpful, self-limiting and even sometimes destructive personal patterns of

leadership. Such self-limiting patterns of leadership are often not obvious but very subtle, contributing to derailment or simply holding one back from going to the next level.

This observation comes from coaching with many different types and levels of leaders, finding that most seem to have one or two primary critical skill areas that, if not developed, serve as barriers. And if successfully developed, help them make major jumps in leadership effectiveness. So it is exceedingly important for you to reflect on and look for those critical developmental “trigger point” areas of greatest importance to your own leadership transformation as you go through this process charting your own development course.

Let’s begin this journey together, focusing here on helping you achieve your highest aspirations for becoming the best leader you possibly can. The purpose is to help you make changes that will create an indelible mark on your people and organizational area.

If you are worried about your capability of changing yourself or changing your own work area culture, remember as you change yourself, your influence will become more and more strongly felt by those around you. Your efforts will be the catalyst sparking their latent desire to improve. The seeds for creating your business improvement are already here, lying within the very hearts and minds of employees’ who need simply to be charged up, revved up and pointed in new directions to harness the greater capacity hidden inside. The simple but powerful maxim applies here: *Self-change synergistically creates change in others!*

So let’s not waste any time! Sit back now, relax, and perhaps even imagine we are in an actual coaching session, sitting in comfortable chairs, chatting and collaborating. Feel free to interject, stop the coach to slow down, contemplate and challenge yourself in discovering new ways of doing and being in leadership!

Competency 2

Empowering Others

Laura stood in front of the group, looking over the faces, wondering how people would accept her. She was the new production manager in this growing industrial tool manufacturing firm and this was her first meeting with the whole group. It did not take long into the meeting when she realized the enormity of the problem. After communicating her desire for change and improvement, she asked for their help promising to listen to what they had to say. The mood was politely apathetic. Laura sensed the undercurrent of distrust. She could see skepticism in the eyes and faces of those sitting around the table.

She has expected this—the crux of the problem was they did not believe her call for a workplace with more democratic involvement on the part of employees and the need for teamwork. They had heard similar words from the previous manager. Someone in the rear of the room quietly leaned over, whispering to another: “Isn’t this the same pile of you-know-what we’ve heard before. Look where that got us.”

Morale was bad, much of which was attributable to the last manager, who did more harm than good. When first on board, he spoke similarly of wanting everyone to work together, needing their ideas and wanting them to speak out. People were at first very excited. Special teams were begun at his request. And once a week on Friday mornings, he initiated an open door policy for employee suggestions.

The trouble was, when push came to shove, he fell back on a more controlling style of managing. A blind spot clouded his ability to accept new ideas that might in any way be perceived as a challenge to his authority. Psychologically his self-esteem was weak, though not readily apparent to others, because it was masked by his “talking the talk” of an open leadership style.

Interest quickly faded after workers found their ideas shot down. Worse yet, he held grudges against those speaking up, thinking that in some way

they were questioning his authority. He established a reputation for tearing others down behind their back, and sometimes directly to their face, destroying egos in the process. Sometimes he would even go so far as to terminate those he labeled as “poor performers” or “bad team players.”

His pattern of leadership was in obvious contradiction to the philosophy of enlightened management he publicly communicated. The effect was devastating—trust was completely broken. People felt it was politically dangerous to speak up. An air of fear settled upon the group; silence offered protection. Under his tenure, productivity improvement goals were not achieved, losses were incurred and morale severely damaged. Good people left; others were threatening to leave when management finally fired him. Laura’s job was to pick up the pieces.

So as Laura spoke, they heard her, but only with distrust. The demoralization was still too deep. However, Laura was firm. She had made a commitment to herself to remain true to her own philosophy of empowering others, rather than a traditional command and control model of managing. Trust would have to be rebuilt; she would have to prove herself. Today was her baptism by fire into a most difficult leadership challenge ...

Imagine changing the atmosphere of your business area—creating a highly charged group of people who love to come to work, are more involved and freely giving of their ideas, who do not stand still but leap at the chance to grapple with new problems and make innovations. That’s the vision—keep it in your mind and don’t lose sight of it. We are headed there. It’s not an unachievable ideal. People have so much to offer, but only if we can help draw them out, encourage them and focus them. The skills required to lead in this way can be learned. And you can make major changes in your people and business area!

Empowerment Drives Higher Performance

But, first, is empowering others really a better way of running a business? Most theories of creating change in business today rest in some way on the concept of empowering people and the use of a more participative management approach. Giving employees more “say so” and involvement is at the core of this philosophy. Teams are being given more power and independence while organizational hierarchies are flattening.

In the real everyday world of business, however, the process of giving away this kind of power to employees is an ideal, not as easy to achieve in practice. In fact, not everyone believes empowerment is the way to go, particularly those still holding to a more traditional authoritarian style of management or those who are just skeptical. Even though there may still be dissenters, the research overwhelmingly supports those in favor of empowerment.

For example, the findings indicate that organizations built around a more participative, empowering management approach tend to be better performing and, in fact, more profitable. Yes, for the skeptics—the bottom-line does not suffer. On the contrary, it improves! Large-scale studies have been conducted on the most profitable, best performing companies across many kinds of industries. One of the key, differentiating factors found in those companies was greater employee involvement marked by self-managed teams and decentralization of decision making in the structure of their organizations.¹

Why is it that such improved productivity and profits were found in the above studies? It was posited that people work harder because of the increased involvement and commitment when they exercise more real control and decision making in their work. In addition, the transfer of more responsibility to those people further down in an organization is a cost-effective practice. It cuts down on administrative overhead as well as other costs associated with a less empowered, thus less motivated work force.²

Another very important finding in support of empowerment is that employees, when surveyed, admit that they are not working up to their full potential and could be far more productive. One of the top reasons for their under-productivity is they are not being involved enough in decision making!³

It should also be noted here that self-managed teams are one of the most common and best ways to empower employees. Two decades of empirical research suggest that self-managed teams, which characteristically have greater autonomy and decision making, outperform traditionally supervised groups in the majority of research studies.⁴

Thus, the evidence is overwhelming, indicating that inviting employees to participate more and giving them more power will help them become more

productive. And this in turn, is also likely to help a company become more profitable! Well, should you try to empower your people more? The answer would seem to be a “no-brainer”.

Employee Resistance to Empowerment

Sometimes employees don't want to be empowered. How do you get your employees to become more involved, take more responsibility and care as much as you about doing a better job? How do you get them to speak up and offer more of their own ideas? Frustration about this is commonly expressed by executives and managers in many different sizes and types of companies. If a leader wants to accomplish something great, then this natural complacency of employees has to be overcome. This should not be taken lightly; it is a challenging assignment.

You have probably tried to motivate your people in various ways, for example, asking, if not cajoling them to speak up, to be more creative with their ideas and be more proactive in solving the most significant problems in your area. However, your success in this regard may have been limited or even disappointing. Why don't employees always jump up, grab the bull by the horns and show more of the kind of self-initiative you would like them to? Employees may often balk, drag their feet or even resent it when asked or encouraged to demonstrate more of this self-initiative. Why is this? How much of the problem is “them” versus “us.”

Let's answer these questions by a careful, objective analysis of the various resistances commonly found among employees in most work settings. Then, we will look at ways to break through these inherent barriers. Knowing how to do this underlies one of the core competencies of great leadership, namely empowering others—waking employees up to give more of themselves and their ideas.

The forces of resistance are many, at the root of which is fear. So this is very much a psychological phenomenon. Protection of ego and self-esteem are central dynamics here. Everyone wants to look good and no one wants to look foolish. Employees think consciously or subconsciously “why risk appearing ‘stupid’ or off the mark?” This is simple human nature.

Asking an employee to come forward with their ideas represents a potential risk of being embarrassed by making a mistake, appearing

unintelligent or having one's competency questioned in some way. So the natural tendency is to lie back, play it safe and keep quiet. Or at best be exceedingly cautious. The comfort of this "safety zone" may have even greater draw given any history of bad experiences—having one's ideas ridiculed and put down by others whether by a superior or by other co-workers. Unfortunately, it seems that people are more commonly overly critical and can tend to always look for the negative in any new or different idea.

Resistance may also be fueled by any one of many possible psychological insecurities already present in the personality of the employee: natural shyness, passivity, lack of assertiveness, social introversion, and so on. In addition, there is another contributing factor—a tendency for employees to harbor a negative attitude toward management and "the company," as though they are adversarial entities to be avoided and dealt with by protecting one's self-interest.

Psychological-personality issues of employees may interact with this negativity toward management providing a particularity combustible combination—problems in dealing with authority, subconscious transference of negative feelings about parents onto bosses and a host of other dysfunctional interpersonal patterns of relating.

These are many of the central dynamics of resistance that need to be properly understood in trying to empower employees. Don't worry if you have been frustrated or disillusioned because of personally encountering this kind of resistance; it's perfectly natural and you're not alone.

Managers Are Poor Listeners

What is the contribution that managers make to this employee resistance? Given the underlying fear and hesitancy of employees, it would seem logical that leaders must go out of their way to draw out ideas and listen very carefully to suggestions and concerns. How good are managers at this? Not very good! This is a common anecdotal finding in our firm's 360-degree leadership surveys. At every management level, feedback from employees repeatedly indicates that managers/executives do not fully listen to them, have already formed a judgment or are biased in other ways. For example, a typical 360-degree feedback comment is "You listen, but not

really; you go with what you have already decided.” This lack of openness pushes employees right back into their safety zone, shutting them down.

When confronted with this failure, many managers will commonly say, “Sure I listen, but I don’t have the time, especially when the some ideas are so off the wall.” This shortsighted, frequently expressed attitude rests on the implied belief that there is something far more important to do than listening, such as some other task at hand that is more of a priority. This ends up just being an extension of the old traditional model of leadership emphasizing that “just getting the task done” is paramount. Unfortunately, it negates the tremendous importance of consciously tapping into the ideas of employees and utilizing their input to accomplish those “tasks” more rapidly, efficiently and cost effectively.

... In her first meeting with them, Laura had been surprised by the depth of the overwhelming resistance of the production group. “I knew this was going to be a problem; I was aware of the damage the last guy inflicted, but still, it really threw me,” she confided to her executive coach. “They were so indifferent—just totally apathetic! How am I going to get this department to realize I don’t want them to hold back. I want them to give more of their ideas?” Laura had just begun working with this executive coach to fine-tune her leadership skills and prepare for the challenges in her new position.

“This situation is even more problematic than the usual resistance most leaders face because of the inner sense of betrayal felt by employees that is left over from their experiences with the previous manager,” commented the coach. “Normal complacency is difficult enough to overcome without the added distrust caused by a negative experience.”

“The first step to take in solving this problem is to establish trust by making yourself a model of integrity and consistency. Put your employees first by accepting their ideas, listen openly to them, use them and give them the recognition for creating a new work environment through their own ideas. Elevate their esteem to such a level that there is no mistaking how different you are from your predecessor and from other leaders. Truly do empower them in ways no one else has. Then, they will give you trust, in fact, an unmistakable high regard.”

Good Listening—Key to Unlocking Empowerment

Being a really good listener is an exceptional skill rarely found in leaders or in most people in general. It is one of the most essential interpersonal skills that can build rapport and intimacy. It facilitates superior communication, as well as conflict resolution among people. Subsequently, its development often leads not only to exceptional leadership, but to the pleasant, unexpected side-effect of improving personal relationships outside of the workplace, most notably with spouse and children.

Accepting the Complexity of Communication

Why is it that we find such widespread difficulty in listening and a lack of openness to others' ideas? Actually, much of the problem stems from an overly simplistic model of communication accepted by most people, not only in business, but also in relationships and life in general, namely, the lack of awareness that communication between any two people is a much more complex process than we normally think. This is why so many problems occur in personal relationships, marriage, and families.

The same words may be interpreted with a slightly different meaning by different people. When an idea is initially communicated by someone, for example in a business meeting, it is often in only a partially formed stage and may be vague or undefined. That is the nature of any new idea—it is in the early stage of formation. So a good leader should expect this and foster a climate of ease and comfort in allowing idea formation to occur more permissively. Helping facilitate progressive clarification and refinement of ideas is essential. Premature negative judgement interrupts this process, stifles the employee and very likely hampers the creativity. Unless there is acceptance of a more complex model of communication like this, then how can one fully empower others?

Also, another area involved in the initial communication of ideas that is fraught with the potential for misunderstandings and wasted arguments is

that of ego attack and defense. The insightful leader must cut through this tendency and intervene, serving as a model by practicing completely open, exceptionally developed listening skill—finding the merit in others’ ideas.

“Searching for the Merit” in Ideas

Really emptying the mind of your own bias and listening to find merit in another’s idea is very difficult. Most react immediately and habitually to what they do not like about another’s idea. It seems to be common to criticize what is wrong with an idea, rather than what is right.

How many meetings have you sat through where one person offered an idea and the first response from someone else was characteristically “*I disagree*”? Then, both parties were off and running in a heated discussion, usually a defense of ego positions. Openness to creative, mutual integration of each other’s ideas is then greatly impeded or lost entirely. What a waste of time, energy and efficiency for all in that meeting!

How many times do you hear someone say: “I really like some of what you’re saying and think it’s worth exploring. Tell us more about it.” Certainly it happens, but it is typically more uncommon than criticism. By pushing up the ratio of positive to negative acknowledgements of ideas, one can help employees begin to feel more genuinely empowered.

Any idea that is communicated has at least 2-3, or more, subparts to it. These are the component aspects that make up the larger idea. Most people immediately react to the one aspect of an idea that has obvious lack of value and begin to argue for all the reasons they disagree with another’s opinion and miss the opportunities that lay hidden within the other subparts of the idea. The exceptional leader must assertively set the ground rules for greater tolerance and acceptance in exploring, clarifying and positively recognizing ideas.

This means that not only does one learn to listen better, but the leader must courageously express a new philosophy among his or her people to create a culture that mutually and synergistically is on a constant red alert—to help draw out new ideas from one another. This takes a good deal of work to change the common tendency toward negative criticism.

This awareness of the complexity in communication and listening skill is rarely acknowledged. And as noted earlier, most managers are not very highly developed in this ability. Though most experts and senior executives agree that being a good listener is an important requirement in leadership, in-depth skill practice is generally absent or superficial at best. The kind of more sophisticated development of listening and communication skill described here has been grossly underemphasized.

Blaming and Complaining Employee Culture

Another potential barrier to well-intentioned leaders wanting to empower people is the deeply embedded negativity within many workplace cultures. Habitual finger pointing and complaining are widely prevalent in many companies. The effect is insidious. Blaming other employees, departments and superiors instead of taking ownership for one's own part in a problem becomes almost a way of life for some employees.

There are those inherently predisposed psychologically toward a temperament of pessimism, anger and negativity. These people, even if only one or two in a department, can have surprising influence over co-workers, spreading the fire of a blaming/complaining work culture. Like an out of control virus, it infects others in a wide sphere of influence. Most in management have had the unfortunate experience of witnessing this phenomenon, dampening or destroying positive work atmosphere, employee morale and attitude toward management.

This blaming-complaining pattern thwarts a leader's efforts to create positive change in culture or sponsor improvement initiatives within their area. Exploratory discussions for change easily get stuck in finger pointing and defensiveness. The tendency is to accuse other persons or parties (management, other departments, etc.) of being responsible for the problem, rather than offering suggestions for how to improve things. It is the leader, and only the leader, who can stem this tide of negativity.

How to change this dreaded negative mental attitude among some employees? A specific action skill for remedying this will be presented shortly and involves directly confronting negativism by applying a form of psychological surgery that challenges all to look only for "solutions."

Letting Employees Solve their Own Problems

From the experience of coaching so many leaders at different levels and types of companies, one of the most common mistakes observed is the failure to delegate responsibility for suggestions of improvement back to the employees themselves. So many managers tend to take on the burden of responsibility themselves when they hear any complaints or suggestions from employees. They are sucked into the “no win” situation of having to evaluate the relative validity of those complaints and then to arrive at some creative way to fix the problems or grievances.

The problem here is multifold. First, finding the time to consider and act decisively on such issues is at a premium. Subsequently, one may either get to complaints too slowly with delays being perceived as procrastination or one may drop the ball entirely, which is even worse. In either case, the leader looks bad in the eyes of the employee.

The answer is to let your people solve their own problems by giving them the power and the responsibility to do so through the use of teams and task forces. Why not? It is actually a far more effective way of doing things. Since teams given more control and autonomy (e.g. self-managed) outperform traditionally supervised groups as noted above, this is one of the greatest structural tools for the exceptional leader in promoting empowerment. So expertise in handling and overseeing teams is a skill essential to great leadership.

Empowerment Versus Control

Failed attempts at empowerment create pessimism for those questioning whether it really works, is desirable in the first place and/or is a more effective way of managing. It is not uncommon to hear the complaint of having given more power and decision making to a subordinate, only to be disappointed. Empowering people through giving more freedom in their scope of action can sometimes backfire. This is a common experience among many managers. Letting go of too much control is not always good. When done prematurely, it can end in subordinates making very costly mistakes, which one may live to regret.

Is this an inherent problem with empowerment—a flaw in the concept itself—making it an inconsistent and unreliable management philosophy, as some skeptics conclude? Such forays into a progressive management approach ending in failure cause many to hold fast to a more traditional pattern of high control. But is this really a true failure? Should one stick with the safety of control?

The answer is an emphatic “no.” Giving across the board freedom too hastily is a set-up for failure. This is the only true failure of empowerment—the leader’s failure to carefully monitor and maintain this balance. The problem is really one of mechanics, the need to more carefully oversee a subordinate’s ability to handle things on their own. This is a skill in and of itself that must be addressed.

Empowering Others—Specific Action Skills Set:

(1.) Soliciting Ideas/Input from Others: Harnessing the power of employee ideas through the aggressive pursuit of their input.

This very first step to empowering others may seem overly simple—stop and ask for ideas from your people. Most leaders rarely do enough of this. It is not sufficient to do this only on occasion, as most do. Rather, it must be done as a matter of course each day, all day, in many different situations in order to break through employee resistance.

The leadership challenge is to successfully draw out the closely held ideas and creativity guarded too securely by most employees. The subconscious protection of self-esteem and avoidance of expected rejection are difficult barriers to penetrate. The truly exceptional leader realizes that a treasure house of potential rests within the minds of their people. The solutions to one’s biggest business challenges lies suppressed inside the minds of many employees. Becoming skilled in listening is the number one way to empower others. But the precursor to listening is that one must first go out and *ask* for those ideas.

Great leaders possessing this rare skill actively solicit ideas from employees. What this means is that they make a conscious point to stop in the middle of their busy day, when they may already even think they have “the answer” or best way of doing something, and ask for others’, especially subordinates’, input. Remaining open to new ways of looking at things, they identify unique value in what they hear, which normally would have been overlooked or dismissed, and they use those ideas, giving credit to the employees.

...After hearing her coach tell her that listening was the “key to unlocking empowerment,” Laura took this seriously and at every opportunity throughout her day began to just ask her people for their thoughts on how to change things for the better. At first, people were reluctant and standoffish. But Laura showed a side of herself to them they had never seen before in a manager—humility in not knowing all the answers and a sincere interest in really hearing their ideas. This went a long way in building trust...

(2.) Higher Level Listening for Merit: Suspending one’s own bias, consciously searching for what has value in other’s ideas (particularly subordinates) and giving recognition by verbalizing that merit to others and doing so frequently throughout the day.

This is the most critical skill to empowerment. Few people master it, even though it has the highest return for any time spent in practicing it because of the tremendous payoff for improving business as well as personal relationships. In this case, one shows they have truly listened without bias by pointing out the value in an employee’s idea. Most importantly, they actually use some aspect of the idea, giving credit to the employee.

It takes this kind of unusual, intense “Higher Level Listening for Merit” skill used not just occasionally, but day after day to blow the lid off employee resistance. And when it does, people start to feel better, esteem shoots up, ideas start pouring out and suddenly the whole culture really starts to change.

There are a total of 36 specific action skills within the *9 Core Competencies* and among these, this action skill is one of the top 2-3 most important because of its potential for triggering such huge leadership growth

while simultaneously changing the culture. Many have transformed their leadership and personal life (family and marriage) through the coaching development in this more advanced higher-level listening-communication skill. It allows the leader to experience life with greater openness, acknowledging and recognizing the gifts of others.

By synergistically using the power of other's ideas, personal affirmation occurs and self-esteem grows. This makes it possible for greater self-initiative and commitment to blossom. Performance in the business area can rise to new level, as employees feel more confident and empowered. That is why so much attention is devoted here to this particular action skill.

The practice of this skill requires careful attention to each step. If followed, one can take their people to an entirely different level of empowerment while strengthening the bonds of their relationships in new ways. The results can be dramatic. However, the natural tendency is for one to cut corners in following these steps, so watch out and be extra careful when practicing.

The 6 Steps to “Higher Level Listening for Merit:”

1. Listen openly without bias:
Suspend own opinion and the bias inherent within it; keep mind off any other mentally distracting thoughts.
2. Search for the merit:
Carefully perform an “idea splitting analysis” to examine the various sub-components to an idea, looking for parts or related aspects of it having potential value (most ideas have 2-5 sub-elements), ignoring those that don't.
3. Verbalize the merit:
Give credit where credit is due by communicating what you like about another's idea that has potential merit, if even just expressing appreciation for their interest in improving things.
4. Ask for and Encourage Clarification:
Most ideas in the initial stage of formulation are vague and not fully defined, so one needs to ask repeated clarification questions, e.g.

“Tell us more about that,” and paraphrase back what is said. “It sounds like you are saying..., is that correct?”

5. “Bridging” Ideas Between People:

Pointing out similarities and ways that selected aspects of one person’s idea can be linked with and/or parallels that of others’, or your own, promoting a collaborative team effort.

6. Follow-up on Ideas of Merit:

Delegate power to the idea-owner and other employees, giving them the job of further exploring, researching, bringing back potential options for further discussion and implementing some element of the idea.

...As Laura sat in one of her meetings asking for new ideas from production people, her mind drifted off to the words of her coach regarding the practice of “Higher Level Listening for Merit.” He had told her: “Empowerment is not pushing employees to greater involvement, rather it is achieved through intensely receptive listening skill.” He was so adamant about its importance, she wondered if it really could make such a big difference to follow each of its detailed steps. In fact, her coaching homework assignment was to practice it today. She was brought suddenly back to reality as an immediate opportunity presented itself for her to test out this new action skill.

One employee spoke up and said, “We have so many problems in production, we need to buy newer equipment but management won’t let us, so we can’t compete like we should with other companies.” Her first mental response was defensive, thinking to herself that his comment was just an excuse for everyone in production sitting on their hands and not doing anything.

But before she made the fatal mistake of shutting down this seemingly ridiculous employee statement, she remembered the words of her coach: “The typical first response by a manager is to give a less than positive response. The two most common negative responses are to defend management when criticized or to point out budget limitations and give reasons for why something cannot be done.” He had told her this amounts to a subtle “put down” of the idea in the employee’s eyes, leaving her or him frustrated, embarrassed or only temporarily placated.

She quickly began to exercise the 6 Step “Higher Level Listening for Merit” process, quieting her mind and focussing in a totally open, unbiased way on each aspect of his expressed idea, even jotting it down on paper as her coach had suggested. This time she forced herself to more carefully look for the positive merit in what had been said. She initiated the formal “idea splitting analysis” and identified 4 different subparts to the employee’s original statement, each separated within the original sentence by commas: (1.) problems in production, (2.) need new equipment, (3.) management won’t allow and (4.) can’t compete with others.

As she forced herself to think in this new spirit of openness, she realized her first unvoiced negative reaction centered only upon number (2.) and (3.) which subsequently resulted in her focussing only on the issues of available monies and on defending management. The other two subparts of (1.) and (4.), she had entirely ignored. Yet, it suddenly hit her how immensely valuable they were. These two sub-elements represent the employee’s genuine concern about production problems and the company’s ability to strategically compete.

What her coach had been telling her hit like a bolt of lightning—it takes courage for any employee to speak up in the first place. It really did not even matter if this employee was way off the mark, unfair and/or shortsighted by putting so much blame on management for not purchasing new equipment because there was great potential value in these two subparts of his idea.

Now, feeling excited, she “verbalized the merit,” saying to this employee: “Thanks so much for telling your opinion, I am happy to see you care so much about what’s happening in production to point out there are problems, and that you’re also concerned about how that harms our strategic ability to compete in the marketplace.” The employee showed visible, pleasure over the recognition given.

Going then to the next step of “clarification of ideas,” Laura asked the employee and his co-workers what they thought were the full set of contributing factors causing the problems in production. After repeated clarification and paraphrasing questions, a truer, more objective analysis emerged. Multiple issues came to light: lack of more stringent quality control, inefficiency in work processes, low employee morale effecting productivity,

lack of good skills training for the existing equipment and poor communication. This clarification served to identify critical areas for improvement that went far beyond just the issue of whether purchase of new equipment was actually warranted.

Lastly, Laura appointed task teams to follow-up and research each of the above contributing factors: quality control, process improvements, employee morale, lack of training and communication. And each team was required to implement an action plan for improvement within 60 days as a result of their further exploration, research and shared collaboration with other fellow employees.

As an outcome of that meeting, one employee left feeling on top of the world for being given such recognition and everyone was excited over really being listened to by their new boss. Importantly, they also had newfound confidence that something could and would be done about the problem.

Laura herself was similarly impressed with the ease of how well the 6 Step “Higher Level Listening for Merit” process worked, though acutely aware of how close she was to initially failing at it. She knew how careful she would have to be in truly internalizing this process so it would become habitual. Interestingly, she realized that all this had occurred without her even exploring the additional merit from pursuing subpart idea (4.) “can’t compete with others,” in which similar exploration might unearth strategically vital concerns to be further examined. That would be for another future opportunity.

She also quickly found that by practicing the last step of “bridging” the ideas of others (finding common relationships among them), she was able to create a much more positive environment for discussions that reduced conflict in meetings where previously people used to waste much time in arguing.

Over the ensuing months, Laura practiced this 6-Step process frequently throughout the day in her many interactions with employees. She noticed a remarkable change as they grew to trust her, knowing that she truly listened to them in a way no other manager had before. People shared ideas more openly with her and with one another. They were much more actively involved, showing much greater self-initiative and commitment.

Another rather peculiar thing happened to Laura. She noticed that the quality of her relationships began to grow and improve in unexpected ways, even at home with her spouse and children! She listened more fully to them and they felt more respected and valued, just like her people at work.

She then remembered what her coach had told her, that mastering this skill has the capability of enhancing one's spiritual and/or higher life values through developing a more fully open way of relating to others—less self-centered, focussed more on others. In fact, he had told her that personal transformation tends to be so great in this regard because of the inherent self-actualization that occurs—learning to be more selfless.

(2.) Eliminating Blaming/Complaining Through “Solution Focussing”: Setting a guideline in one’s business area that all blaming and complaining be stopped among employees, requiring instead that “suggestions for improvement” be given; enforcing this by actively stopping employees from finger pointing and asking them to instead give a “positive suggestion for improvement.”

The effective leader must somehow learn to counter the negative hypnotic spell of the complaining-blaming culture. This must be done first, before trying to empower others in any other way. People will avoid taking more responsibility and initiative in decision making when they are in a habitual pattern of looking for blame. They must be moved to stop the tendency to complain and instead proactively offer suggestions.

The blaming-complaining habit is a nasty one, often deeply inbred and sometimes without the person’s awareness of the habit-pattern. To break this conditioned negativity requires a 100% commitment on the leader’s part. The best way to remedy the problem of “blaming-complaining” is to adopt a very strong stance of being only “solution focussed.” In this case, the leader becomes a champion for encouraging others to change their complaints into helpful “suggestions for improvement.” This makes the employee an equal partner in the solution of the problem, rather than to passively sit back and just be critical.

In order to accomplish this one will have to initiate a new philosophy of being “solution focussed” in all situations and banning all “blaming-complaining.” To make it work, however, you must publicly spread the word about this new rule and not mince words nor be afraid to enforce it in all meetings and discussions. This also means that the leader has to eliminate any personal tendency on their own part to blame and complain about others, especially behind their backs. Rest assured, the ever-vigilant eyes of the employee will be watching for any personal violations of this new code, potentially ruining one’s credibility.

...One of the very worst aspects of the way Laura’s production group initially operated among themselves was the tendency to blame and complain others (management, other departments, etc.) for any problems, rather than taking responsibility for changing or improving things themselves. It had become a habitual way of life, largely reinforced by several people who were deeply pessimistic, negative individuals. These latter people had been working behind the scenes for many years in modeling this unfortunate mode of thinking and acting.

She had been warned by her coach that most every workplace has such entrenched negativistic “blamer-complainers” and to watch out for them, his advice being strict application of the “solution focussing” action skill to cure this problem.

In early meetings Laura had been very challenged. Just as she was starting to get people to speak up more honestly and constructively, Harry, a long-time employee, would inevitably speak up saying such things as, “Well, this is all well and good, but you know nothing is really going to change because management will never allow any real change to occur.” After such cynicism, she instantly noticed the atmosphere and mood take a downturn, as though the comments were draining the very life force out of the group. When this happened, Laura was initially intimidated.

But instead of reacting defensively, she kept her wits about her, fighting this black cloud aggressively through applying the “solution focussing” action skill. She openly educated her people about “blaming-complaining,” what it is (without any embarrassing reference to specific people in her group), how it saps energy from people and keeps them from taking positive action. She started a new strict policy of “No blaming or complaining,” stating that only “suggestions for improvement” were

acceptable and that she would enforce this new rule, of course in a kindly manner.

Now this did not necessarily immediately stop Harry and the 2-3 other worst offenders because the pattern was so habitual for them. However, it helped the rest of the group begin to see more clearly this negative tendency and without Laura having to name any names, others became aware of how Harry and other complainers negatively affected the entire group.

Most importantly, what did emphatically change Harry and others was that after every blaming-complaining comment, Laura unwaveringly stopped them very kindly and respectfully in their tracks, saying to them, "Would you please give a suggestion for how that could be improved?" She did this over and over, without any judgement or negative evaluation that might "put them down." After continued strict enforcement, this effectively stopped the problem.

In fact, Harry began to joke about his problem with being the resident pessimist and Laura found that he actually generated more great positive ideas for improvement than anyone else because of his lengthy experience and technical knowledge. Consequently, she gave him great kudos for his ideas, transforming his role from a negative detractor to one of her greatest advocates and supporters for positive change.

(4.) Empowering Teams and Task Forces: Attempting to consciously give away more power to employees by delegating responsibility to them in the form of empowered teams or special task forces that solve problems and make critical decisions more independently with less manager control.

Part of the leadership philosophy championed here is one that suggests leaders at all levels should take their own power back. This may seem somewhat contradictory when the subject of discussion is empowering others, yet the two are not mutually exclusive. One must not be drawn into the old paradigm of traditional business in which employees look to "management" for solving all their problems and complaints. And when those in "management" do not do this successfully, or in the way employees want, they become the whipping boy or the scapegoat for employee dissent. So

empower your employees, but do not disempower yourself by falling into this common trap.

Instead, treat your employees like a true mini-business owner and do not so readily take on what should actually be their own responsibility. For problems and complaints that your people communicate to you, use the “Higher Level Listening for Merit” 6 Steps. But note the last step, which is to delegate to the idea-owner and other employees the job of evaluating, researching and arriving at creative ways for doing things through the use of teams and special task forces.

The action skill for most effectively using teams and task forces involves several key points to insure success:

3 Critical Points for Empowering Teams

(1.) Select Cross-Functional Team:

Collaboratively select the best members for any task force or team with the input of your own people, making sure it is cross-functional and/or cross-departmental in representation.

(2.) Require Formal Action Plan:

Require that the team develop a formal, written action plan for improvement (see Competency #6 Execution for details).

(3.) Team Responsible for Implementation:

Give the accountability to the team—they watch over and insure implementation but you carefully oversee them (see action skill #5 below regarding supervision).

...The task teams that Laura had appointed were designed to help solve the 5 problems in production that had been brought out in earlier discussion: (1.) quality control, (2.) process improvements, (3.) employee morale, (4.) lack of training and (5.) communication. Each task team was comprised of members representing all relevant functional workgroups within the production area and included cross-departmental representation whenever such involvement was at all relevant.

Each team was given primary responsibility for solving the specific problems in their respective area of concern but had to engage in a continuous feedback loop with the whole production group, reporting back to them periodically. In addition, each task team had a formal reporting schedule with Laura in which she reviewed their actions on a weekly basis, providing coaching and guidance.

Over the course of their 60 day initial timeline to implement an action plan for improvement in each area, frequent communication occurred back and forth between the task teams and the other co-workers in the department to make sure they were adopting measures in agreement with what the whole department wanted. And Laura did have to step in on occasion with some teams when they started to move in directions she felt might not be in the best interest of everyone involved.

However, at end of the 60 days of frequent meetings and hard work, the entire department was amazed at the incredible work that had been done and impressed with the well organized, written action plans presented by each task force team. They had Laura to thank and newfound confidence in their own ability to make change happen and get things done...

5.) Balancing “Letting Go” with Providing Direction: Carefully overseeing each direct report and team/task force with the right balance of coaching yet “letting go” by allowing growth in their confidence and ability to make decisions independently—providing helpful direction when needed.

One must always balance the letting go of supervision with careful oversight to insure that the independence in any given area is warranted. The leader must weigh an individual’s proficiency to operate more or less independently across the span of all their job responsibilities. Knowing when to let go and when not to is the issue. Giving more independence with less monitoring is best conceptualized as a continuum. Giving more power and less control as proficiency is demonstrated in selected specific areas requires a more analytical approach to understanding more completely the strengths and weaknesses in each of one’s people.

A key factor necessary in this process is the continued follow-up and overseeing that needs to take place. To better make the judgement call as to when a person is ready for more autonomy, there must be proven history of success, a series of multiple situations in which the leader has overseen performance more closely and been convinced it's time to let go. Very frequently leaders are not as careful in this monitoring process as they should be. Failures in empowering others are most often caused by letting go too early across a broader scope of activities than is actually warranted by a subordinate's track record in the specific competency area of concern.

Helpful to empowering the employee is a clear message that you want to give them more power. Without this, you may not wake them from the slumber of their complacency and/or resistance. So it is essential to communicate to them that the purpose of supervision is for coaching them to higher levels of competency—widening the range of empowerment. Assurance that the purpose is not to inherently “control” or limit one's field of action can be helpful. Using a nonauthoritarian style of supervision is, of course, absolutely imperative. Many leaders miss opportunities for empowering their people by giving too much direct instruction and advice. Such direction should actually be used more discriminatively, since it reinforces the employee's dependency on you for making decisions and figuring out the best solutions.

One particularly effective strategy to counter this dependency is to not give the quick answer you may be inclined to give when a subordinate comes to you with a question. In fact, to really break down the resistance to taking more power, one will have to endure hearing the employee express frustration sometimes when you do not give them the immediate answer they are looking for. Although it may take more time in the short run to stop and ask the report what they think should be done, it saves time in the long run by developing the person's own capacity to operate self-sufficiently. It is shortsighted to say, as many managers do, that taking this extra time is not possible in the middle of a busy day.

...The work was challenging for Laura in supervising her people with all their respective strengths and weaknesses, trying to carefully give them scope for action but making sure they did not hang themselves. She at first was overwhelmed, so she started to make notes on each of the people who

reported to her, what she felt were their greatest skills and their most challenging weaknesses.

She established a weekly report system for her key lead people, keeping it brief and to the point. She used time effectively, choosing to discuss at length only the areas where that individual really needed help or guidance. One of her best people had just left their report session and Laura was feeling very happy about the level of competence of that person.

But a sudden twinge of frustration came over her as she looked out of her office to see that her next report session was with Susan, a long time employee with the company who tended to shy away from showing any real initiative. Susan had remained seemingly happy with staying at a relatively low position level. She seemed unduly dependent on authority, especially on Laura to give her answers rather than think independently herself.

Today, however, Laura was prepared, having discussed the situation with her coach. She was ready to try and help Susan overcome some of her dependency. As the meeting progressed, Susan quickly reverted to her dependency pattern when discussing a particularly thorny problem in her area and asked Laura, "What do you think I should do?" This time Laura stopped herself from giving an answer and asked instead, "What do you think?" Giving her predictable response, Susan said, "I don't know, what do you think, you are the manager."

Again, refraining from giving a quick answer, Laura forced herself to sit back in the chair and said, "Susan I'm interested in what you think. Please tell me your thoughts," recalling her coach's advice not to give in to the dependency pattern, regardless of Susan's response. Practicing this patient approach, she gradually pulled out more and more of Susan's ideas, forcing her to think creatively and express outwardly the thoughts, opinions and ideas that she normally kept tucked away in the back of her own mind.

Doing this repeatedly in all Laura's meetings and daily contacts with Susan, the change became gradually apparent. Susan slowly became more assertive. A blossoming of confidence could be seen even in her face and in the way she expressed herself. In fact, after a few months it looked like she entertained an entirely new attitude about her job, was enjoying it more and was now taking on a greater leadership role.

Susan was just one of the many energized so dramatically by Laura's new empowering leadership as the entire culture changed, becoming more dynamic, positive and responsive—moving to new levels of productivity.

Summary Review: Competency #2: Empowering Others

Creating a culture of high employee participation, involvement and self-initiative where input is given more freely through continuously seeking out ideas (especially subordinates'), listening/verbalizing merit to their ideas, empowering teams/task forces and carefully overseeing others with the right balance of coaching vs. "letting go."

Specific Action Skills Set

1. Soliciting Ideas/Input from Others:

Consciously taking the time during a busy day to stop frequently (minimum several times/day) to actively ask for ideas/input from others, especially subordinates.

2. Eliminating Blaming/Complaining Through "Solution Focussing":

Setting a guideline in one's business area that all blaming and complaining be stopped among employees, requiring instead that "suggestions for improvement" be given and enforcing this by actively stopping employees when they finger point, asking them to instead give a positive suggestion for how things can be done differently.

3. Higher Level Listening for Merit:

Suspending one's own bias, consciously searching for value in other's ideas (particularly subordinates), giving recognition by verbalizing that merit to others, doing so frequently throughout the day.

4. Empowering Teams and Task Forces:

Consciously giving away more power to employees by delegating responsibility to them in the form of empowered teams or special task forces that solve problems and make critical decisions more independently with less manager control.

Notes

Straight To The Top:

¹ M. Lombardo and Eichinger, *Preventing Derailment: What to Do Before It's Too Late* (technical report no. 138), (Center for Creative Leadership, 1989).

² Schippmann, Ash, Battista, Carr, Eyde, Heskoth, Kehoe, Pearlman, Priena and Sanchez. The Practice of Competency Modeling. *Personnel Psychology*, 53, 703-740, 2000.

Competency #1-Inspiring Vision:

¹ *Management Review*. (American Management Association), July 1996).

² James Collins and Jerry Porras, *Built To Last*. (Harper Collins, 1994).

³ *Management Review*. (American Management Association), July 1996).

⁴ William M. Mercer, Inc., *Mercer Management Consultant Survey* (Mercer, August, 1999).

Competency #2-Empowering Others:

¹ Jeffrey Pfeffer, *The Human Equation: Building Profits By Putting People First* (Harvard Business School Press, 1998).

² Ibid.

³ William M. Mercer, Inc., *Mercer Management Consultant Survey* (Mercer, August, 1999).

⁴ Jeffrey Pfeffer, *The Human Equation: Building Profits By Putting People First* (Harvard Business School Press, 1998).