

Overlooked Leadership Building Blocks in IT?

By Kay M. Bower



I work in IT. Not as a technologist or developer; not as an analyst or project manager. I work in IT as the leader of a group focused on quality and compliance for IT. My customers are my fellow colleagues throughout IT – a group numbering nearly 500 in size. And our organization is in trouble.

We are facing *another* downsizing, accompanied by substantial reductions in budget. We've cut travel, we've cut education and training, we've cut investment in tools; now we're cutting jobs. The one thing that hasn't been cut is our workload.

As a leader facing this situation, I believe that discipling and mentoring the folks on my team will become more important than ever. Why? Well, there are four reasons: [1] It is an investment I can make in my team that doesn't have a direct cost to the company. [2] It tells folks I know they are important; that their goals and growth are important and I'm willing to invest in them. [3] It sets an expectation for the future and helps them to envision their contributions in that future and [4] when delivered with a focus on balancing the needs of the individual with those of the organization, it has benefits for everyone.

Organizations make disciples in the sense that those who join must be able to do the work, and understand and support the goals of the organization. Discipling from a leader can help the follower move from "how to do" tasks to "how to be" in the organization. Mentoring from a leader can help the follower move from learning about themselves, the organization, the business and so forth, to the definition and attainment of personal and professional goals. The relationships that are built through these interactions are significant – to the individuals involved and the organization.

In my organization, the assurance of quality and compliance for IT is a tricky thing. There are complex and vague regulatory requirements and federal laws with which we must comply. There is no black

and white – only shades of gray. We may write procedures and processes, but everything requires careful review and interpretation. In such a challenging work environment, having an approach to help develop leaders that possess knowledge and expertise is crucial. Leadership development depends on both discipling and mentoring. These activities need to occur all along the pathway of leader/follower relationships – at whatever level those relationships exist. There is a continuum of activities in the leader/follower relationship that should allow for the progression of both leader and follower from mostly discipling and some mentoring to mostly mentoring and some discipling.

Recent studies of participants in formal mentoring programs in high tech firms have reported greater levels of role modeling, career development and organizational commitment than those found in employees that were informally mentored. Formal programs have the additional advantage of visibility within the organization – for both the leaders/mentors and the followers/participants.

In the IT world in which I've made my career, there is little effort to formally disciple or mentor followers. New employee orientation provides a focused, one-day event wherein the new hire is provided a broad spectrum of information about the organization, its goals and common operating procedures. From there on out, a new hire will get most, if not all, job task and career-related training and support from their leader. In the fierce focus to become centralized, standardized and cost effective, it seems no one has the time to define programs that would provide this needed leadership development, much less implement them. Yet having such activities are crucially important to developing the next generation of leaders. And, there are benefits beyond the obvious.

Those who seek to build up others through mentoring often experience an increase in visibility as their protégé achieves and advances. Leaders that mentor also experience the satisfaction that comes with contributing to the success of another. The organization benefits, as both the leader and the protégé gain new knowledge, build networks of relationships and commit more fully to the organization's success through the opportunities that arise out of successful mentoring.

Early in the development of a new employee, discipling is my focus as I seek to help inexperienced team members learn what to do, when to do it and how to do it. As these team members grow and progress and learn, I start to add in mentoring, helping them to consider what goals they have, what they need to learn and do and be to accomplish those goals. As we move from direction to mutuality of definition and pursuit of goals, there is more and more mentoring and less and less discipling. This focus is good and I've seen positive results as team members learn and grow and mature.

The problem is, my approach is ad hoc, catch-as-catch can. I try to do what I can for each member of the team whenever I can. But workers in high tech areas like IT need formal mentoring. The culture of

IT organizations, with the ever-changing technology, tools, applications and knowledge, drives a need for continuous learning and personal development if employees are to remain relevant contributors to the IT group and the larger organization. Establishing a formal program to provide for that learning and development can deliver the necessary relevance and build into the organization leaders that know how to continuously learn and grow, adding to existing technical knowledge, skills and expertise. This includes key capabilities like flexibility and an ability to embrace change.

A formal program is essential because it can have such a positive impact on the participant's knowledge, experience, relationships and progression through the organization. Career advancement is particularly impacted by the learning, enhanced visibility and networking that are part of such programs.

Second, a formal program is a commitment that helps to build trust. In a world where downsizing is routine and employees know that at seemingly any moment they can move from "asset to be protected" to "expense to be cut," trust is a commodity that's hard to come by. When employees see the organization is willing to make a formal commitment, investing time, resources and opportunity for their benefit, the foundation of trust begins to be built. That trust grows and strengthens as those being mentored experience the emphasis that good mentoring places on balancing the needs of the employee with those of the organization.

Third, formal programs enhance the self-directed nature of the developing leader's career. Great leaders encourage their followers to think through what is important to them, what they want to achieve, the contribution they want to make. Then they work together to chart the path of stretch goals, new opportunities, challenging assignments and personal development needed to make the goals a reality. This builds within the participant confidence and self-assurance – key attributes for building to higher levels of responsibility and achievement within any organization.

An intentional, formal program to develop leaders and leadership skills through discipling and mentoring can be a tangible demonstration of an organization's commitment to its people, even when times are hard. Building skills, experiences, relationships and trust in high demand, continuous learning environments where the work doesn't stop and the resources are thin can help an organization retain staff, develop leaders and offer a tangible commitment to employees. The benefits, to the participants and the organization, are quantifiable. Reaping those benefits is only as far away as the establishment of a discipling and mentoring program.

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