

Survive or Thrive? From Management Control To Leadership Empowerment

Most boss-employee relationships are transactional, trading time for money: “Follow my orders and you’ll keep getting paid.” Or, “I put in my time/follow the rules and get my pay.” These relationships may “survive,” but they don’t “thrive.” Bosses are “managing,” but they’re not “leading.”

That is a missed opportunity for both employees and employers. Numerous human beings go through life missing what could have been a valuable expression of their existence. At the same time, organizations miss out on the enormous value employees contribute when those individuals thrive and are enthusiastically committed to their employers’ success.

So why not create a culture where employees don’t merely survive—they thrive?

When thriving, employees experience: (1) A purpose they share with their boss and others at work; (2) The sense that their work matters — that they make a difference; and (3) They feel connected to their boss and others as human beings, and see themselves as more than cogs in a wheel, employee badge numbers or robots that can fog mirrors.

What leadership traits result in work environments in which employees can thrive? (1) Humility; (2) Tenacity; and (3) Vision. I call this combination the “HTV Leader.”

Humility

Humble leaders see themselves as servants of a cause more important than they are. They’re mission directed, not ego-directed.

Humility is not having low self-worth. I’ve worked with leaders with big egos who nevertheless lead others with humility, and I’ve worked with humble leaders who lead as if they are the sole visionary in the company. Humility comes down to what you actually **do** — and even more importantly, how it’s **perceived**.

What’s the simplest and most effective way to demonstrate humility? **Ask questions.**

The late Peter F. Drucker said, “The leader of the past was a person who knew how to tell. The leader of the future will be a person who knows how to ask.”

Organization leaders who only tell their employees what to do display arrogance and ignorance of the employee potential they’re wasting. Leaders who ask questions show humility and create opportunities to unlock their employees’ full talents and abilities.

In working with managers and executives, I ask them about their **Period-to-Question-mark Ratio**: “When you’re talking to your employees, for every one of your sentences that ends in a period, how many end in question marks?” For the vast majority, it’s an overwhelming imbalance in favor of periods.

The closer the ratio gets to one-to-one, the better. The more you ask questions (preferably open-ended exploratory, **not** rhetorical or cross-examination questions), the more your employees' work becomes about them—the difference they make, the value they add and their importance to the mission. In my experience, this shift in focus produces greater levels of commitment, accountability, energy and enthusiasm—things a traditional boss can't effectively command or control.

In addition, a listening approach often generates valuable insights and ideas that benefit the organization. Although you may be the leader, it doesn't necessarily follow that you have the best ideas. Good listening will help you mine your employees' knowledge, talent and experience, and will make your employees feel invested in the processes that you develop as a result of that listening.

Tenacity

Are there parts of your job less pleasant than others? Rhetorical question: Does that make them less important?

Tenacity means doing what needs to be done when it needs to be done, regardless of how pleasant or unpleasant it is. In my interviews of retired CEOs and other senior executives, most of whom were generally tenacious, they often cite as their biggest mistake tolerating problematic behavior or performance in others, especially other senior level employees. Confronting people they've known and worked with for a long time was too unpleasant for them.

I once asked a retired company president, "What do you miss the least about your former job?"

The company president didn't think long. He said emphatically, "What I miss the least is easy—I'll never have to fire an employee again!"

In your organization, do you and other leaders confront performance or behavior issues promptly and directly? All too often, these issues are left to fester until they can no longer be ignored. And a relationship that began win-win ends up toxic lose-lose.

Tenacity means that when a gap arises between expectations and performance or behavior, the manager deals with it directly—no avoidance, delays or circumnavigating. Instead of dropping the employee issue to the bottom of the agenda (or keeping it off the agenda), tenacious leaders move it to the top. As Robert Frost wrote, "The best way out is always through."

Tenacity doesn't mean being harsh, inflicting pain or generating stress. Indeed, when you combine tenacity with vision and humility, you'll be surprised at how often the confrontations you dread turning ugly end up positive and constructive. By tying the problem to the Big Picture—the why—and using questions to engage the employee in diagnosis and prognosis, you turn what would otherwise be a blame game into a collaborative act of problem solving. Results include a solution to the immediate problem and a healthier relationship going forward.

Vision

Vision means connecting what employees do to an important purpose. The purpose could be providing products or services that benefit others, or bringing good in the world. It could be creating environments where people thrive. It's more than shareholders making money.

I've worked with leaders who never thought much about the Big Picture—"that vision thing"—yet were able to develop a shared sense of purpose with their employees. I've also worked with Big Picture leaders who failed to connect their own vision to their employees' efforts, through an inability (or unwillingness) to share that vision.

When I work with managers and executives, I ask them about their **What-to-Why Ratio**: "Every time you tell

an employee what you want, how often do you explain why—the underlying purpose the employee’s action will serve?” I encourage managers to make this ratio one-to-one. Every “what” should come with a “why.”

When leaders combine “why” with “what,” they jettison the old school hierarchical, command and control management model. Instead, they foster a sense of purpose and engage their employees in a shared mission or quest. Roles and responsibilities may differ, yet both manager and employee pursue the same objectives and share the same core values.

Conclusion

Do you see yourself simply as a manager? Or do you also see yourself as a leader? How about combining the two and practicing HTV leadership? That means demonstrating humility by listening vs. telling, having the tenacity to surmount obstacles and tackle problems when they arise, and doing so within a vision of a compelling future for your organization, your employees and you.