Entrepreneurial spirit: How managers can inspire their youngest employees to think like leaders

The college graduation season of 2018 has come to a close, and Ziprecruiter reports that recent college graduates are entering the strongest job market the U.S. has seen in a decade. As a result, it’s likely that you could soon manage someone who is in their first professional role or at least, in the earlier part of their career.

Here are some simple ways you can inspire employees to embrace their roles and think more like leaders—regardless of their level of experience or day-to-day responsibilities.

Give them real problems to solve. You can encourage your youngest employees’ professional development by giving them responsibility, ownership over their work, and exposure to other people in the company whose roles may not regularly intersect with the team you manage, but you may see new qualities emerge when you give them the opportunity to solve real business challenges they wouldn’t otherwise encounter.

If it is culturally appropriate in your company, share challenges and dilemmas that you could use their help solving, and/or those you know the executive leadership team is trying to solve; give your employees an opportunity to provide suggested solutions.

At American Express, for example, Harvard Business Review reports that the company invited 75 of its identified high-potential employees (many of whom had just graduated from a business school) to solve real business challenges.

In a collaborative working session that took place over the course of just a few days, the employees worked in small groups to devise possible solutions to a number of different business problems various leaders in the company actually faced.

At the end of the intensive, the teams were given the opportunity to present their recommendations to company leadership. Five of the proposed solutions were reportedly implemented.

Ask them to think like entrepreneurs. The longer your team members have worked for your company, the more likely it is that they will start to approach their work based on the norms, processes and standards that your company or its culture has adopted—informally or formally.

While some business processes are necessary to streamline operations and work collaboratively, they can also stifle creativity and discourage younger employees from considering other approaches that could be just as
When the employees you manage take on new projects, or express frustrations with the progression of existing responsibilities, encourage them to act like entrepreneurs.

Challenge with a prompt like: “If this project were being created for a company you owned, how would you approach it? Are there any missing pieces that would add value? Are there unnecessary aspects of the project that create costly bottlenecks or leave us exposed to unnecessary or avoidable risk?”

When you give younger employees “permission” to see their work through their own perspective instead of the lens your company or its culture has embraced, they may approach their jobs differently.

In turn, having the freedom to be creative may help them feel more confident expressing their ideas or suggesting new ways of solving problems.

**Encourage them to think about who they want to be.** It’s common to ask a younger employee where they see themselves in five or 10 years in an interview, but far less so to ask what type of person they want to be in your company.

Challenge employees to think about the types of people they enjoy working with, and peers and colleagues they admire. This may inspire them to think about their future potential, and how they’d like to start establishing their personal “brand” as professionals—and as people.

When you encourage employees to think about their careers beyond salary, or a title, they may start to realize that every opportunity to contribute or be present in team meetings or company functions can help them work toward the type of employee or leader they want to become.