Harry Franzheim—an HR/OD Practitioner for over 30 years—has published this newsletter to bring you careful insight into reducing costs and unlocking employee potential.

We see it time and time again: good employees that are technically proficient getting promoted to positions of leadership (lead, supervisor, manager) with little to no expertise in human interaction and team dynamics. As a result, many organizations fail to realize the full potential of their human capital and they spin in a cycle of oppressive, self-sealing patterns of behaviors that frustrate employees and management alike.

In fact, the biggest obstacle to growing leadership talent is found in organizations in which most if not all of management “came from the ranks” without any formal leadership training or human interaction theory. And thus the cycle continues.

It’s a Complex Challenge

Training alone is not the answer. Spending money sending a lead to a one-day class or bringing in a consultant to provide hourly training sessions without considering the full potential of their human capital and the overall HR system is a waste of money and can lead to increased frustrations throughout the organization.

“Expectancy Theory of Motivation” (Jac Fitz-enz, The ROI of Human Capital) comes into play in a significant way when we start asking employees to behave differently from the way they have been for years. It’s hard to adapt new behaviors when no one else around you is and the effort for doing so is not regarded or rewarded. That’s why training alone is not the answer. It might be psychologically satisfying to be spending the money and “investing” in your people by training them, but without a systems approach to the problem (because the system is the problem), change in behavior will be unsustainable.

What is the Problem?

To solve any problem we need to have a problem statement. Here it is: “We promote people into leadership positions without culture and the overall HR system is a waste of money and can lead to increased frustrations throughout the organization.

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leadership ability.” Why would any organi-
ization consciously make this same mistake
time and time again? Root cause can be
found by asking “why” five times to get to
the bottom of this error. I will spare you the
time and the exercise of asking “why” five
times and get to a possible root cause: The
senior management team is not in agree-
ment about the expectations of leadership.
Ask them independently what they think
is the role of leadership and you will get
as many different answers as the number of
senior managers that you ask. Worse
yet, they may default to the current set of
outdated behaviors demonstrated among
leads, supervisors, and managers and
defend those in an attempt to fend off the
presumption that there is a cavernous lack
of effective leadership within the organiza-
tion that they oversee!

Enabling Behaviors
And this is where it starts getting tough.
Senior management has created patterns of
relationships with their direct reports. The
same is true for everyone in a managerial/
supervisory/lead position. The question
at hand is “how helpful are those patterns
of relationships when behavior change is
needed?”

Study the relationships of a human
resource manager and watch as they pro-
tect, defend, console, applaud, and cajole
employees. The HR manager sees him or
herself as responsible for the employee and
believes it is his/her job to care for them.
The HR manager becomes the parent to
the now enabled child we call an employee.
The HR manager routinely gives second
chances and cuts deals with employees say-
ing, “Don’t let me down.”
The same holds true for other senior
managers in the organization—they treat
employees as if they are children who must
come to them for their approvals, their
assignments, and their acceptance. “Good
employees please their bosses, trying to
make them proud” just like children do to
avoid the disappointing scowl, the turned
shoulder, or the ambivalent attitude from
Mom or Dad. Once they became “leaders”
they were given tacit approval by their boss
to unleash the power and the glory on the
poor people they were supposed to be lead-
ing! And the cycle continues.

Recognize that it is psychologically
rewarding to be the center of your work
team’s existence and to say to yourself,
“Without me these people wouldn’t know
what to do.” To stand at the front of the
factory handing out assignments, spouting
directions, playing the part of commander-
in-chief might make you feel important but
all it is doing is fueling a workforce of chil-
dren as employees that cannot and will not
think for themselves despite being every bit
capable of doing so—perhaps even better
than you the general!

They Are Adults!
Employees are adults and leaders ought
not be commanders and control freaks.
Instead, leaders must learn how to treat em-
ployees as adults by first seeing that each of
them is much more capable of contributing
more to the organization than the current
state of things allows. Read that again.

Leaders will need to trust their employ-
ees. They build trust by giving them the
latitude, time, and patience to learn how
to become proficient in their assignments.
Leaders need to learn how to ask questions
more than to give directives. And when
you’re asking more questions, you need to
know how to listen, really listen. Listening
is not a signal of weakness or that you must
adopt or buy in to what is being said. Lead-
ers need to listen to understand. Employees
as adults often have solutions to problems
unknown to the leaders. Remember,
those closest to the problems are also clos-
est to the solutions.

Tough Love
If you truly care about your people you
will let them fail. You will help them learn
from their failures. True change in an or-
ganization comes about when managers/su-
pervisors/leaders learn to let go of the answers
and become comfortable with asking ques-
tions and listening. It may not be the most
expeditious way to get things done, but it
is the most lasting. Senior managers must
not rush in to protect their direct reports
when the impact of the change is causing
tremendous angst and anxiety. Senior and
HR management will be inclined to “put
things back the way they were” because
they don’t have the trust, the knowledge, or
the guts to bring about the needed change
to the structures and the behaviors within
their organization. And so, the cycle will
continue.