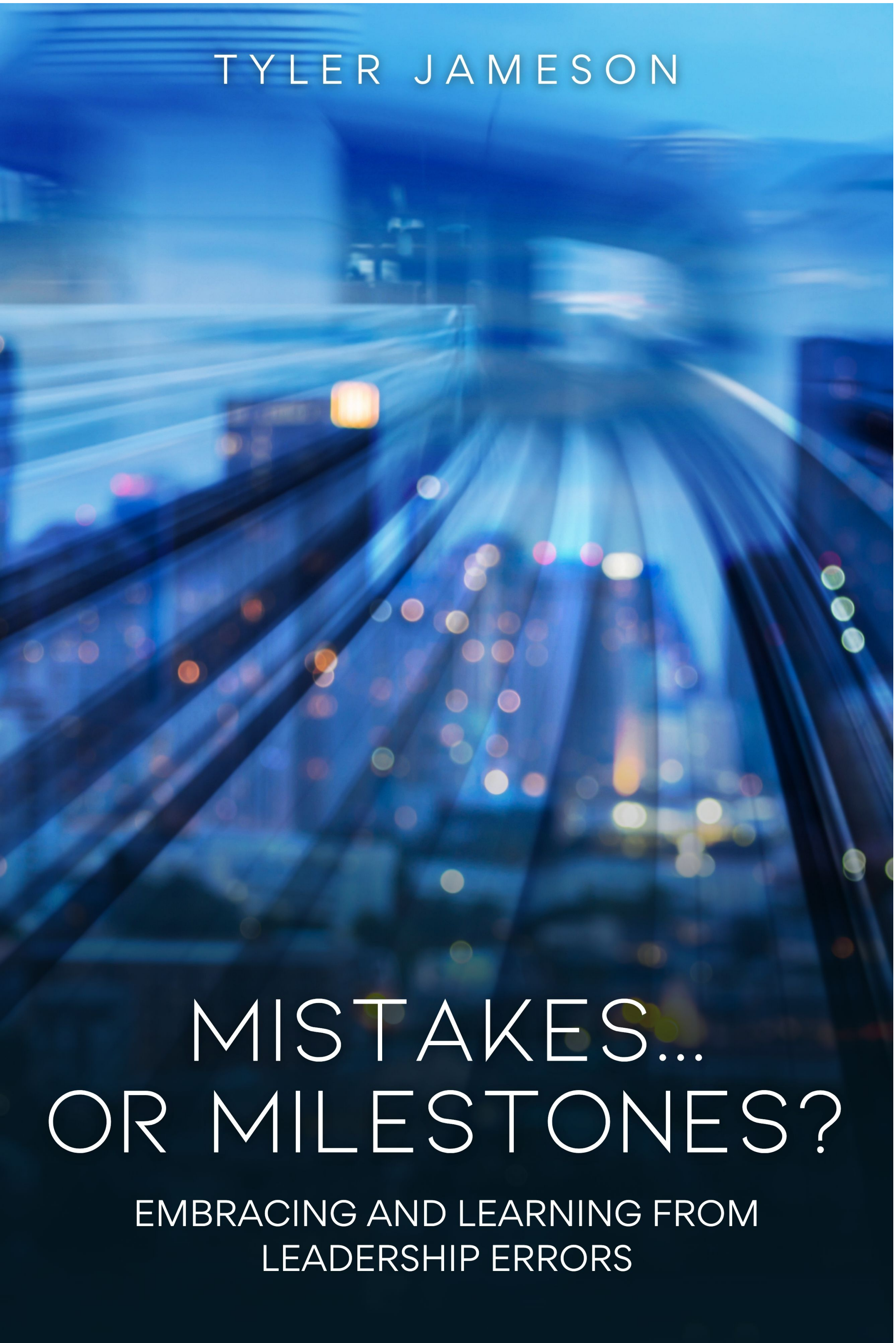


TYLER JAMESON

MISTAKES... OR MILESTONES?

EMBRACING AND LEARNING FROM LEADERSHIP ERRORS

MISTAKES... OR MILESTONES: EMBRACING AND LEARNING FROM LEADERSHIP ERRORS

By: Tyler Jameson

INTRODUCTION

Leaders are human, just like the rest of us. They aren't perfect, they need to grow and develop, they need to try new things and, like the rest of us, they are going to make mistakes along the way. The biggest difference a leader will see is that leadership mistakes can often have a significant impact on the success and effectiveness of a team.

I have worked with many clients experiencing struggles with their leadership teams. When I ask them what type of support and development they are looking for from me, a common response I hear is “we need to eliminate the mistakes being made by our leaders.” While I understand the urge to eliminate all mistakes, it is just not a feasible solution.

We all make mistakes.

As I type this paragraph, I have spell check software, grammar check software, and language revision software active to help. And you know what, it doesn't stop there. I still have several trusted colleagues who I will ask to proofread everything in this book. All of that is before I even send this to an editor for further review. I like to think that I am a skilled writer, but even so, mistakes will be made.

A better focus for the leaders who work for my clients is to try and understand their errors. What mistakes are being made? What contributing factors are leading to these mistakes?

Most important of all… what can we learn from these mistakes?

Being able to identify and understand the root causes of the errors being made will position any individual or organization for success.

Throughout this book, I will identify the most common leadership mistakes that I have seen both leaders and organizations make over my career. I will take some time to cover what the mistakes are, why they occur so often, and look at what we can learn from these examples. I will tell you some stories about clients I have worked with and quite a few situations that I have found myself in over the years.

As you read through these examples some of them may resonate with you as something you have seen in your workplace or something you have done yourself, and that's great. Don't worry, we all make mistakes. Let's keep our focus on understanding why mistakes were made and the key learnings we can take away with us.

CHAPTER 1 - LEADERS HAVE TO LEAD

What does a leader do? Seems like a simple enough question, right? I can tell you I have asked hundreds of clients this exact question when I am conducting needs assessments and I never get a simple response. I once had a mentor who would tell me that if someone asks you a simple question, your goal should be to give them a simple answer. When I ask a client "what do the leaders at your organization do," I typically get responses that go into great detail about the ins and outs of their daily activities, or budgets, authorities, or operational deliverables. None of these answers are simple. They are complex and detailed and miss the one most important thing that I want to hear. What do leaders do? ***They lead people.*** That is the simple answer to the simple question. What do I mean by "they lead people?" The truth is, it can look very different depending on the makeup of the company, but if someone is in a leadership role their primary responsibility should be to lead the people who report to them. The starting point really should be that simple. Successful organizations need to prioritize the development of their employees and leaders need to be the driving force behind that.

Unfortunately, as you have probably figured out based on the title and intro to this book, I have come across many leaders who struggle with actually leading. The mistakes that these leaders make can be detrimental to an organization's success and growth. These errors can lead to promoting incompetence and indifference by overlooking the importance of a development pipeline. This occurs when leaders fail to identify and nurture talent within their organization, leading to the promotion of individuals who are ill-equipped for their new roles. So, what are the specific errors that I have seen? Let's take a look.

The number one error I have come across is leaders who simply don't know what skills and competencies their team members actually possess. Peter Drucker, considered by many to be the originator of management as a profession, is often attributed with the quote “you can’t improve what you don’t measure.” We see this in organizations of all sizes. An individual will get promoted to a higher position without proper evaluation of their skills and competencies.

I was doing some work with a client who was a startup tech company. Upon its inception the vast majority of the employees were very technically skilled. Their ranks were almost all made up of computer programmers and software engineers with one individual who had a background in finance. This organization found success relatively quickly and there was a need to recruit new employees at a rapid pace. As this recruitment took place there was a need for the company to create leadership roles. They determined to promote people from within for these leadership positions. While internal promotions are effective for many companies, it's important to have a basis for the selection of who you choose to promote.

I was working with the senior leadership team to determine their workforce plan for a second phase of expansion, and they really struggled with the questions I was asking. I wanted to understand the leadership knowledge, skills, abilities, and other competencies that their current employees possessed. Unfortunately, they couldn’t provide me with any of that information. They had only been concerned with technical skills; they weren't considering their ability to lead. Their decisions to promote had been solely based on tenure with the company. In their haste, the founders promoted employees based solely on their technical skills, without considering their ability to manage and inspire a team. As a result, many of the newly promoted managers struggled to communicate effectively, delegate tasks, and resolve conflicts. These hiring and promoting practices meant that they had a really difficult time attracting strong candidates, and when they would find a great new employee, they had a hard time keeping them. Their turnover rate was extremely high and the employees that were willing to stick around often were not the strongest workers to begin with.

This company couldn't understand why they had such a hard time finding and keeping employees. They spent countless hours (and dollars on external consultants) revisiting their compensation structure and benefit plans. They sunk money into their office spaces, they added game rooms and a cappuccino bar, they tried to create a completely different culture around the office. Nothing they did had the meaningful impact for which they were hoping. In reality, they couldn't understand what wasn't working because they had no baseline to start from. It was the lack of leadership capabilities that was hindering this company's growth and causing talented employees to leave in search of better management. You've probably heard that people don't quit jobs, they quit managers, and it's a very true statement. Study after study has shown that the number one factor that will drive a person to leave a role is their direct supervisor. Not money, not advancement opportunities, not work environment, but their leader. These new leaders may not have been the best choice for these roles. Their tenure and technical strengths created a tendency to "show" rather than "teach" new employees. It led to many new staff members feeling micromanaged in their roles, and the lack of autonomy led to them looking for new roles.

There are five common characteristics that employees are typically looking for to feel fulfilled in their role. They are Variety, Task Identity, Task Significance, Autonomy and Feedback. These five characteristics together make up the Job Characteristics Model as popularized by SCHWIND (REF). There was no understanding of these characteristics amongst those who were promoted, as they had never been presented with these ideas before.

To overcome the attraction and turnover issues they were having, I worked with this tech client to help their leaders better understand these five characteristics and how they can nurture these characteristics in their employees and the work they are responsible for. I explained that by focusing on teaching and supporting their employees rather than just jumping in and doing the work themselves, they were allowing their staff to identify with the task they were completing. This also helped them understand the significance of the tasks and connect the importance of their work to the organization as a whole. It also allowed the employees to get involved in a variety of new tasks and develop new skills within their existing roles. The employees felt that their work was more meaningful and they felt a greater connection to the work they were tasked with. By reducing the amount of micromanaging that was taking place, team members started to feel more autonomy and responsibility for their work, which led to more pride and buy-in to the strategic direction of the company. Finally, we really encouraged the leaders to focus on feedback with their teaching mentality. The goal was to help their employees understand what the expectations were and let them know if they are or are not meeting the desired expectations. In the end we saw some amazing results, turnover dropped significantly, performance was up across the board, employee satisfaction was at an all-time high, and they became an employer of choice in their industry. When they had a role to fill, they would be flooded with interested applicants wanting to be a part of this wonderful company.

Understanding the job characteristics model was a successful solution for the client I described, but there is a bigger question that we need to consider. What could have been done to avoid this type of situation in the first place? We have established that a lack of leadership skills and capacity was a major contributor to the issues in the organization. So, our goal should be to increase the leadership capacity of our company.

What can we do to increase leadership capacity? I can share the one thing that made me successful as a leader early in my career. Preparation. Before I was ever acting in a leadership role, I had completed a fair amount of leadership training. I had worked with a leadership mentor. I understood the fundamentals of leadership. I was prepared to manage performance, to deal with conflict, to create psychological safety for my team.

But I was an exception, not the rule.

We see it all the time, people are promoted into their first supervisory role having no formal training or development around being a leader. A vacancy comes up and they apply or are asked if they are interested in the role and before you know if they got the job. There is no real support for this newly appointed leader right off the bat. Oftentimes training and support is only first brought up when the next corporate performance management cycle comes around. At that time some development goals are set and the leader signs up for some coursework around leadership. By the time they receive any formal training that would prepare them for this new role, it's too late. It may be six months to a year of potentially making mistakes, creating bad habits, and alienating employees before they start getting the training and support that can help them be a great leader.

I often call it the parachute leadership dilemma. I am not a particularly big fan of heights and there is absolutely no chance I would go skydiving for fun. If I ever need to use a parachute it will be because the plane I am on is about to crash. If that time ever comes, I know that I would much rather have some prior knowledge and guidance around how to properly use a parachute. How does it work? What problems might arise? What to do if and when it goes wrong? I would want to know before I have to use the parachute. The other option is to jump! Hopefully, you'll figure it out before it's too late.

I know that's an extreme example, but it's what we do to many people in our organizations. They are thrust into a role that requires competencies and skills they've never been taught or had to use before, and we expect them to succeed. These new leaders may find success initially, but it's often by pure luck or coincidence. They will most likely rely on what they know best, the leadership style and practices of their former supervisor. If the leader before them was struggling and contributing to the poor leadership capacity of the organization, then you can see why this is such a damaging approach. Bad habits and poor fundamentals start to permeate and multiply within the organization. The team will continue to struggle.

At this point, you may be thinking to yourself, "This is all great to hear, but what can we do about it?" Succession planning and strategic workforce planning are great places to start. Without getting into too much detail on succession (we will cover succession planning in a chapter a little deeper into this book), it is the process by which we measure both the performance and potential of an employee to identify and rank key contributors in our organization. Succession management can be a large and daunting task, one that may be more work than a company is prepared to do. So, one way I often look to improve leadership capacity is by expanding existing leadership development programs within these organizations.

Many organizations have a development process for their senior leaders. What I try to do is refocus the existing programs to include employees who may be potential future leaders within the organization. I challenge senior leaders to identify team members with strong leadership competencies that may make good future leaders. Then I had them change the name of their program. Changing the name to an aspiring or future leadership training program can have a big impact. This means we can start to teach these potential leaders the skills and competencies they will need to be successful in future roles. It often includes pairing them up with a leadership mentor from within the organization (not their direct supervisor).

If we implement an aspiring leadership training program, does it mean that new leaders won't make mistakes? Of course not, we all make mistakes. What typically happens when a leader enters a role with adequate training and preparation is that they have more confidence. They are far more likely to act when action is required. People who are put into leadership roles without training or knowledge are far more likely to avoid conflicts and avoid making difficult decisions. Leadership training will often tell us that we are far better off making a mistake trying to solve a problem than we are to do nothing at all. This advanced knowledge can help reduce both the number of and severity of mistakes that are made by new leaders.

The more an organization can build its leadership pipeline the more leadership capacity it can create. This leadership capacity raises the floor of what's expected from leaders. Over time, having up and coming leaders emulating what they have seen from their former leaders is no longer a bad thing, it can actually help further the good habits we are instilling. The benefits then become exponential over time.

In wrapping up this chapter, I want to emphasize that it's crucial for leaders to internalize a straightforward truth: a leader has to lead. The complexity of daily operations, budgets, and authorities can often overshadow the essence of leadership—guiding, developing, and inspiring people. We've discussed the profound impact of leaders not knowing their team's skills, a mistake that can lead to promoting the wrong individuals and hampering organizational growth.

I have illustrated the pitfalls of neglecting the Job Characteristics Model, the five elements that make work fulfilling for employees. Lack of awareness of these aspects can result in high turnover and dissatisfaction. Yet, the silver lining lies in the transformative power of leadership development.

The positive outcomes of leaders embracing a teaching mentality, understanding the characteristics their team seeks in their roles, and fostering a culture of feedback are significant. These simple yet powerful shifts can turn a struggling organization into an employer of choice, attracting top talent and ensuring sustained success.

As we conclude, the focus shifts to a proactive approach that emphasizes leadership preparation. The "parachute leadership dilemma" is a reality in many organizations, where leaders are expected to perform without prior training. By investing in leadership development programs, mentorship, and strategic workforce planning, we can create a robust leadership pipeline. This not only minimizes mistakes but sets the stage for a culture of effective leadership, ensuring the organization's success in the long run.

Remember, being a leader is not just about theposition; it's a responsibility to guide, inspire, and develop others. In the chapters to come we'll continue exploring common leadership mistakes and uncovering strategies for creating strong, impactful leaders. So, here's to leadership that truly leads—may it be the cornerstone of your organization's success.

CHAPTER 2 - DIVERSITY EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Over the past decade we have seen a bigger and bigger emphasis being placed on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in the workplace. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion are critical concepts in the workplace that focus on creating a more inclusive and fairer environment for all employees regardless of their background, characteristics, or identities. Before we get into the mistakes I see from leaders, let's make sure we are all on the same page about what DEI programs entail.

First up we have the "D." Diversity refers to the variety of individual differences among people in the workplace. This includes, but is not limited to, differences in race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability, religion, socio-economic status, educational background, and more. Organizations that focus on diversity prioritize the recognition and valuing of these unique characteristics and perspectives.

Next, we have Equity. Equity is about ensuring fairness and justice in how employees are treated. Equity means acknowledging that different individuals may require different resources and support to have equal opportunities and access to success. Equity aims to address historical and systemic disadvantages that some groups face, providing them with what they need to thrive.

The final component is Inclusion. Inclusion involves fostering a workplace culture where all individuals feel respected, valued, and empowered to participate fully. It goes beyond just having diverse employees and also focuses on creating a psychologically safe environment where everyone can contribute their perspectives, experiences, and talents without fear of discrimination or exclusion.

Once we better understand DEI, we can start to see ways that DEI can add value to employees and organizations as a whole. Some of the most common benefits we see include enhanced innovation and problem solving. A diverse workforce brings together people with various backgrounds and experiences, leading to more innovative ideas and approaches to problem-solving. We often also see higher levels of employee engagement and productivity. Inclusive workplaces create a sense of belonging and psychological safety, which boosts employee morale, motivation, and productivity. Diverse organizations often have better, faster decision makers. Inclusive teams encourage open discussions and diverse viewpoints, resulting in more informed and well-rounded decision-making processes. DEI can also improve an organization's ability to attract and retain top talent. Organizations that prioritize DEI are more likely to attract and retain talented individuals seeking inclusive and supportive work environments. This in turn can lead to an improved reputation. Companies with strong DEI programs are viewed more favorably by customers, clients, and the public, enhancing their reputation and brand image.

It is also important to remember that the opposite is often true for organization that lack DEI programs. They miss out on all the benefits we have discussed. If an organization is not prioritizing DEI there is no guarantee that the status quo will remain, there are major risks associated with a lack of DEI programs. Homogeneous workforces can lead to stagnation and a lack of fresh perspectives, hindering innovation and adaptability. Employees who feel excluded or undervalued are more likely to be dissatisfied, leading to higher turnover rates and increased recruitment costs. Failing to address diversity and inclusion issues can expose organizations to discrimination claims and legal action. An exclusionary environment can lead to conflicts, silos, and reduced collaboration among team members. Companies that neglect DEI may face public backlash and damage to their brand reputation.

Now that we got the “textbook” stuff out of the way, I hope we have a shared understanding of the importance of DEI. We can now shift our attention to common errors that leaders make regarding DEI in the workplace. All these definitions and descriptions are related to organization wide programs that support DEI. When we are talking about individual leaders the same principles apply. We can think of teams as small organizations, with the same challenges and risks associated with a lack of diversity.

One common mistake that leaders make is ignoring diverse leadership preferences on their team. This can lead to a lack of inclusion and hinder the team's ability to reach its full potential. Not all team members will thrive under the exact same type of leadership. There are many factors to consider about how to best lead a team. For example, different generations and cultural backgrounds can greatly influence someone's preferred leadership styles. I have seen this mistake firsthand many times, where a leader only considers their own leadership style and preferences without taking into account the diverse perspectives and preferences of their team members. This can be a major problem that leads to a lack of engagement and motivation among team members, as they may feel that their voices are not being heard or valued. For instance, I worked on a team where the leader preferred a strict hierarchical structure and expected everyone to follow orders without question. While there were times that this approach could be effective, like in short notice and emergency situations, for the most part the work environment was one where team members were scared to share ideas and would never provide feedback that could be considered critical towards our leader. I have always preferred to work in a collaborative environment, where team members share and bounce ideas off each other in a psychologically safe environment.

This leader assigned me and another team member to a project that involved the creation of a tracking system for performance management scores for all the employees in our organization. Our leader had provided us with a detailed list of requirements, tasks, and expectations for the project. Shortly after we began work on this project, we heard rumblings from a key stakeholder that our organization was in talks with vendors to bring in a new Enterprise Resource Planning software system that would include a human resources information system to replace the one we were working with for this project. My colleague and I discussed at length if we should tell our leader about what we had heard from our stakeholders, as we feared we may get in trouble for challenging the directions that we were given. Ultimately, we did decide it was in our best interest to let the leader know what we had heard, but neither of us felt comfortable discussing it in person with our leader so we sent an email letting them know that we had come across a potential problem that could affect the task we were assigned. The response we received was “Were my instructions not clear enough for you? Please execute as instructed.” This leader had no desire to discuss any potential changes to the plan. We received this response immediately after sending the initial email. It was clear to us that no thought or consideration was given to the concerns we had brought forward.

Upon hearing this response, we felt we had to move forward with a plan that was ultimately going to be an ineffective use of our time. As a result, we didn't really give it our all and we were both very disengaged in the work we were doing. We were about 60% of the way through the project when the new Enterprise Resource Planning system was announced, and our project was shut down by our leader. In the end we had worked for about four months on a project we knew would not get off the ground, all because our leader was not open to hearing diverse viewpoints and opinions. I have seen many similar scenarios where team members who prefer a more collaborative and participatory approach may feel marginalized and hesitant to contribute their ideas and insights.

To overcome this error, leaders need to be aware of what their leadership style is and how they are perceived by their team and other stakeholders around them. Leaders should actively seek input from their team members and create an environment where different leadership styles are encouraged and respected.

One way this can be achieved is by conducting regular check-ins with team members to understand their preferences and providing opportunities for them to take on leadership tasks that align with their strengths. For example, a leader can organize a workshop where team members can explore and discuss various leadership styles and identify their own preferences. By acknowledging and accommodating diverse leadership preferences, leaders can create a more inclusive and cohesive team.

The second mistake I see leaders making is failing to consider diversity and inclusion in the creation of teams. When leaders fail to consider the diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives of their team members, they miss out on valuable insights and ideas that could contribute to the team's success.

For example, if a leader only selects individuals from similar backgrounds or with similar skill sets for development opportunities or promotions, they may inadvertently exclude individuals who could bring unique perspectives and innovative ideas to the table.

I remember a time I was hired by a client to help with a full reorganization of their HR department. They were struggling to meet their internal client needs and had sub-par leadership across the HR team. I sat down with the CEO and discussed why they felt there were issues. He informed me that the organization had grown a great deal over the last five to seven years, and they were facing new and large challenges that they had not encountered in the past. I started this engagement by creating talent profiles for all the HR team members, starting with the VP and working my way down through the rest of the team. The goal was to better understand what type of experience and expertise they had on their team.

One thing that became very apparent early on was that most of the senior leaders within the HR team had been with the organization for a very long time, with many falling between fifteen and twenty five years at the company. The VP of HR had started with the organization as an entry level laborer in their manufacturing department and worked her way up over the last thirty-four years. In that time, she had worked in virtually every department and had an absolute wealth of institutional knowledge at the organization. As you may expect, the VP of HR was heavily involved in the recruitment and promotion of leadership roles within the HR team. She was a strong believer that experience far outweighed education when it comes to leadership. She would try to reward loyal team members and looked to surround herself at the HR leadership table with other individuals who had significant experience within the organization. She looked to employees who had “seen it all” within the company and had strong relationships and understanding of the operations of the organization.

The reality was that this hiring practice created a leadership team with very little diversity. The overwhelming majority of their understanding of how HR should successfully function came from within the organization. Most had no formal HR education, nor did they have any experience in HR at other organizations. As the organization continued to grow, the HR leadership team was ill equipped to handle emerging challenges they had never encountered before. I am not trying to discourage anyone from trying to promote internally, but as is the case with most everything, too much of a good thing can be a problem.

How can we avoid this error? Leaders should actively seek out diverse perspectives when selecting individuals for development initiatives. This can be done by implementing inclusive selection processes that consider factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, experience, and education. Additionally, leaders should provide equal access to development opportunities for all team members, regardless of their background or previous experience. By consciously including individuals with varied backgrounds, leaders can foster a more inclusive environment that encourages diverse perspectives and enhances the team's overall performance. DEI on a leadership team can go a long way towards shining a light on blind spots that may exist on a team. I had a leader who would often say “I don’t know what I don’t know.” It's a simple and obvious statement, but it's one that holds a lot of meaning. This likely holds true for many leaders. We can’t know everything, so it is a great idea to surround ourselves with team members who can help fill the gaps in our knowledge and help us create better solutions and practices for our teams.

This gap in knowledge can also manifest in another common error I see leaders making. We often have a lack of awareness regarding our unconscious biases. It is important to make a clear distinction between conscious and unconscious bias.

Conscious bias is best understood as intentional bias. This is when we are deliberately excluding or including individuals based on a specific characteristic. This could be anything such as a leader choosing not to hire women, or individuals over a certain age, or a leader having a strong preference in hiring people from their alma mater, even when they are not the most qualified for a role.

Unconscious bias on the other hand, is when a leader or organization may be biased in their selection process unintentionally. Sometimes this can be due to the internal processes that are in place, sometimes it can be a simple lack of awareness, but in all cases, once it becomes apparent that there is unconscious bias present, we should look to remove it.

The most common way I have seen this is the hiring of internal candidates. I have worked with clients that have very different practices for hiring internal applicants than they do for bringing external candidates aboard. For example, the process for external candidates will include a posting window of three weeks, pre-screen interview completed by HR, an in-person interview with HR and the hiring manager, a final interview for fit with the team, followed by reference checks, physical ability tests, background checks, etc. Alternatively, the internal process may be a much shorter posting window, and only involve one interview prior to an offer being made. When this happens we may be unconsciously pushing hiring managers towards internal candidates. Put yourself in the shoes of the hiring manager. You are under pressure to meet your goals and execute your strategic deliverables. Do you want to have someone in a recently vacated role three to four weeks from now, or six to ten weeks from now? I think most managers want someone as soon as possible. It is not a situation where a manager is actively looking to avoid any external hires (that would be conscious bias), this is an example of unconscious bias in the hiring process.

Another common example of unconscious bias in recruitment is language levels and style. Some organizations use language that can be difficult to understand for individuals who have learned English as a second language. This can include idioms and phrases that may not be easily understood.

When the time comes to address this error, leaders should undergo unconscious bias training to become aware of their biases and learn strategies to mitigate their impact on decision-making. There are many online and in person options that can be used to help leaders and organizations better understand their unconscious biases. Additionally, leaders should implement structured selection processes that focus on objective competencies and skills rather than subjective judgments. By adopting a more objective and inclusive approach to leadership selection, leaders can ensure that individuals from all backgrounds have equal opportunities to contribute and excel in leadership roles.

Failure to address stereotypes and assumptions can hinder diversity and inclusion within teams. When leaders fail to challenge stereotypes and assumptions about certain groups of people, they perpetuate biases and limit opportunities for individuals from underrepresented groups.

To wrap up this chapter I think it is important to once again reiterate that while I am pointing out errors that leaders make, I am by no means stating that perfection is the goal. Everyone makes mistakes, it's how we react to the mistakes we make that matter most. Are we learning, are we growing, are we trying to become better leaders? Leadership mistakes such as ignoring diverse leadership preferences on your team, lack of diversity and inclusion in recruitment and development initiatives, unconscious bias in leadership selection, overlooking the value of different perspectives, and failure to address stereotypes and assumptions can have a detrimental impact on teams. However, if we are aware of our blind spots and we are actively seeking out diverse perspectives, challenging biases, and creating an inclusive environment, we as leaders can overcome these errors and foster a more diverse and effective team. By embracing diversity and inclusion, leaders can unlock the full potential of their teams and achieve greater success in their endeavors.

CHAPTER 3 - CREATIVITY IN THE WORKPLACE

The workplace is always changing, always evolving, and as leaders we need to be aware of what is changing. We should always be looking to innovate and keep up with the changing world around us. This means we need to cultivate creativity and innovation within our team. This is becoming even more important and challenging as we see work being done in remote and hybrid environments. We want leaders to foster creativity, but there is a need for balance with structure and boundaries. Lorne Micheals, the creator of Saturday Night Live, famously said "to me there is no creativity without boundaries. If you're going to write a sonnet, it's fourteen lines, so it's solving the problem within the container."

This sentiment is reflective in the world of leadership. We have structure and boundaries, things like client deliverables, budgets, and organizational requirements. These represent the container within which we need to work, but there is still all kinds of room for creativity and flexibility in the working environment.

Fostering creativity is something I have worked on with many of the leaders that I have coached. In this chapter we are going to look at some of the common pitfalls that have tripped up leaders.

It is a safe assumption that at some point in your life you have been partway into an interview, and you were asked some form of the question “what type of leader do you like to work under?” This is a pretty common question, and what I find interesting is that quite often, people ignore the question and rather than identifying what kind of leader they work best under, they jump to describing the leadership behaviors they don't like. If you had to bet on what the most common leadership behavior candidate don’t like, what would you guess? If you guessed micromanager, then you win the prize. Time after time, candidates will say that they don’t like to be micromanaged. Micromanaging is the number one action that will stifle creativity. Micromanaging is a common mistake made by leaders who feel the need to control every aspect of their team's work. This not only stifles creativity but also demotivates team members. The textbook example of micro-manager is a leader who constantly checks in on their team members' progress and dictates every step they should take. This limits peoples’ ability to think outside the box.

But micromanaging can take other forms. I was coaching one leader that, due to the Covid 19 pandemic, had her entire team move to a fully remote working model. She was a very intelligent and caring leader, and she did her homework. She understood that it was quite common for leaders to micromanage a team that moves to remote work. This leader made it her mission to ensure that her team would feel like they had the room to be creative and have free reign on the development of the projects they were assigned. On the surface this approach makes sense, and the last outcome you would expect would be a team that felt micromanaged. Unfortunately, by the end of the first year of this working arrangement, that was exactly the feedback that was collected in an engagement survey for her team. The team was provided space, but turns out it was too much space. There was no “container” for the team. As a result, oftentimes the work they submitted to this leader was not what she needed. She didn't want to go back to them and tell them that they did things incorrectly or even differently for fear they would feel she was micromanaging, so instead she would redo the work on her own to better suit the needs of senior leadership that she was supporting.

This was a problem for a couple of reasons. The first was because this practice had the exact opposite effect of what she intended. When her team saw the ultimate results of the work they completed, they would see that it was completely different from what they had provided. Even thought they would be told “I couldn't have done it without the work you provided," or “this was a real group effort,” they felt that their efforts were being ignored and that it didn't matter what they delivered, their leader was going to change it to exactly what they wanted in the first place regardless what work the employee provided. This led to a feeling of being micromanaged. Their thought process was “if she’s going to just change what I do to whatever she wants it to be, then why am I doing it in the first place?” In addition to feeling micromanaged, it also led to a second issue. There were significantly higher levels of disengagement and dissatisfaction within her team. Before long there was an increase in turnover and employees took longer to complete tasks and the work they were producing was not at the same level of quality it had once been. The third and final issue this leader faced was more personal. She was burning herself out. She found herself redeveloping so much work her team had done in addition to her role as a leader that she was working way too many hours. This led to extremely poor work-life balance for her. It started to affect her physical and mental health. As a matter of fact, this was the reason she reached out to me for coaching support in the first place. She was looking to find support in recapturing some work life balance. It was only through discussion and some root cause analysis that we were able to get to the heart of the matter and start working towards an effective solution for her and her team.

So, what were the solutions we put in place? It started with creating a container for project assignments. We worked to build a project intake form and process. This allowed her team to ask her questions about her “must haves,” “can't haves,” and “must avoids” related to each project. This allowed for plenty of room for creativity while still ensuring that they were aligned with the overall vision for the projects. There were also scheduled check-in times for each project that ensured the process was moving forward and that the creativity and innovative ideas the team was including were still going to be effective for the overall project goals.

Instead of micro-managing, leaders should focus on creating overarching boundaries prior to delegating tasks and empowering their team members to make decisions independently. Trusting their expertise will encourage creativity and allow for innovative solutions.

Effective communication is essential for fostering creativity within a team. When leaders fail to communicate clearly, it leads to confusion and misunderstandings that hinder creative thinking. For instance, if a leader fails to articulate their expectations or provide feedback on ideas shared by team members, it can discourage them from contributing further. There can be times where poor communication is intentional. The example in the previous section comes to mind. That leader was intentionally not communicating her vision to her team in an attempt to ensure she wasn't micromanaging them. This led to negative results.

More commonly when I see leaders who don't effectively communicate with their teams it is unintentional. They simply lack the understanding of what information their team wants and needs to be successful. I was once working with a client who had recently completed a merger with a competitor in their industry. They had sorted out most of their workforce planning issues as well as their compensation structure challenges. They even had a pretty good handle on training and merging corporate culture. I was brought in to help with their last hurdle—benefits.

The two organizations had very different benefit programs. One was extremely flexible with a large component of employee self-service options. It included a strong flexible health spending account and a wellness account for employees. The other program was extremely rigid with no real options for employees, but it was very comprehensive and well-funded. Prior to my arrival they had spent a surprisingly long time trying to create a blended best of both worlds approach to benefits. When I came in, I quickly asked what their goal was for the new program. Their goal was to upset as few people as possible with this change. Sure, it wouldn't be what the employees were used to, and they won't all like it, but hopefully it won't be that big of a change to adjust to.

I was a bit surprised by this approach. Generally, when I work with clients, if during the engagement conversation they start by saying something to the effect of "we know no one will like this decision, but we think it’s the right way to go,” it is a sign that there may be some communication issues in play. By no means am I suggesting that all decisions will be universally accepted and liked by everyone in your organization, but if you are making a significant change there should hopefully be some supporters of the decision and the new direction.

I mentioned to them that I was a little surprised that they were trying to somewhat stick with the rigid benefits program. I didn't expect their employee base to feel so strongly about the rigid benefit program, as most organizations have found their employees to prefer flexibility and control over their benefits. Their response was quite direct. They said “we don’t know which of the programs our employees prefer. We just assume they will want to stick with what they know already.” I had to actively suppress my urge to bulge my eyes and say, “are you kidding me?” Their issue was simply a lack of understanding. I suggested that we send out a brief, all employee survey that outlined the options available to gauge where their preferences may lie. Their results were overwhelmingly in favor of a flexible program that allowed the employee to allocate their benefits to the services, paramedical programs, and health spending accounts of their choosing. This client never took the time to open lines of communication with their employees and ultimately nearly missed out on a creative solution to the problem in front of them.

In the end the leaders of this organization almost made a costly decision that would have left the vast majority of their employees upset when all they needed to do was ask for their opinion. Positional power does exist in most organizations, but that doesn't mean we have to ignore others below us in the organization. The best leaders encourage open lines of communication in all directions to help foster creative problem solving.

Leaders should prioritize open and transparent communication channels. Regularly sharing information, providing constructive feedback, and actively listening to team members' ideas will create an environment where creativity can thrive. Additionally, leaders can encourage team members to ask questions, seek clarification, and engage in open discussions to ensure everyone is on the same page and ideas can be freely exchanged.

Related to this is one of my biggest leadership pet peeves I want you to be aware of. I have seen so many leaders who, with the best of intentions, like to tell their teams they have an “open door policy” or some similar message, letting people know that they are open to feedback and conversations of any type. While this is great, that same leader will have a schedule that is booked solid, and when they actually are in their office if you go to talk to them they will tell you to make an appointment with their EA. Encouraging your team to come to you openly in a psychologically safe environment is a wonderful thing for a leader to strive towards, but it only works if they are able to actually follow through on the promises they are making.

This leads directly to the next mistake I often see; failure to set clear goals and expectations. When team members are unsure about what is expected of them, they may hesitate to take risks or propose new ideas. For instance, if a leader does not clearly communicate the desired outcomes or the level of autonomy team members have in decision-making, it can lead to confusion and a lack of creative thinking.

This is why most organizations have systems in place to establish clear expectations and provide a shared direction for their employees. Oftentimes this is achieved by first creating a mission statement. A mission statement defines a company's purpose, guiding its decision-making and direction. This is the foundation for the strategic direction of the organization and the employees across all departments. Steven Covey has been known to say, “if you don't set your goals based on your mission statement, you may be climbing the ladder of success only to realize, when you get to the top, you're on the wrong building.”

This reminds me of a time I accepted a job as an HR director for a manufacturing firm. On my first day at this new company, I was completing the normal onboarding process you would expect, paperwork, some training manuals, meeting some of the key leaders in the organization and the like. In the afternoon of my first day the owner of the organization came by my office to introduce himself and offer to take me on a tour of the manufacturing facility. We were about halfway through the tour when we entered the main manufacturing area. As we walked in, directly in front of us on the wall was a forty foot banner with their mission statement written on it in big bold letters. It read “Our mission is to lead the industry with a commitment to safety, collaboration, development, and innovation. We aspire to create a workplace where our employees are empowered to unleash their potential and our products are a symbol of excellence and reliability.”

I read the statement as I walked in and I told the owner that I thought it was a great mission statement and that it was an amazing idea to have it up on the wall as the first thing employees see every day as they walk into the facility. What a great way to remind them of the mission and to help them connect to the strategic direction of the organization. I will never forget his response when I told him these things. He looked me dead in the eyes and said, “Oh, that stupid thing, it was here when we moved in a couple of years ago.” I couldn't believe what I was hearing. This was a previous tenant's mission statement that was never taken down. The fact that they never bothered to remove it and that he considered a mission statement a “stupid thing” was the first of many, many red flags working there. I understand it can be difficult to have a mission statement that resonates with all employees in an organization, but to have another company’s mission statement up on the wall for all your staff to see each and every day is something that shouldn't happen. A poorly written mission statement or no mission statement at all would have been better for that organization.

The best organizations have a strategic direction that cascades. It starts with a mission statement that clearly identifies the organization’s purpose. From there, the senior leadership team sets their goals based on the mission and vision of the organization. The goals that they set cascade down to the next level of leadership, who use them to set their own goals and so on, until all employees have working goals that are in alignment with the bigger mission and goals. This gives them the structure and direction to foster creativity and innovation.

I have worked with leaders who are actually quite skilled at goal setting. They consistently set strong goals that are fundamentally SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, timely). However, they miss one very important piece… Alignment. It doesn't matter how strongly written your goals are, if they do not align with the mission and strategic direction of your organization there is a real chance they will be ineffective. Goals can lead to creativity and innovation, but if those ideas aren't actually supporting the direction of the organization, they may not be useful. If you are the leader of the marketing team and you set a series of goals for your team that focus on pushing your brand in your current primary location and demographics you may think that you are moving in a successful direction. The truth is, your team can come up with a brilliant marketing plan and ad campaign, but what if your organization has a different vision? What if they are looking to acquire a competitor and move into international markets, or target a totally new demographic? Your plan was SMART, your ideas were creative and well supported by your team, but they are ultimately going to fail because they are not supporting the strategic direction of your organization. The key for leaders is to ensure they are aware of the corporate mission and vision and the goals of the leaders above them to ensure that their efforts are supporting the bigger direction of the organization.

Sometimes there are strong goals and plans in place, but there is a lack of clear communication by a leader. Without a clear understanding of goals and objectives, team members may struggle to understand what they are working towards. This lack of communication around direction can dampen their motivation and hinder their ability to think creatively.

I once worked for a leader who was notorious for this. She would regularly give us detailed lists of tasks to complete with all kinds of different deliverables, but we never really understood how they all tied together. As a team it was extremely frustrating, as many of the pieces we were working on would be part of a bigger system or program but we weren't aware of how they were connected. As a result, we ended up duplicating so much work. We were never really rowing in the same direction.

One particular example I can remember is when I was developing a mentoring program for some of our senior leaders. We were trying to create this program as a development opportunity within our succession planning practices. After creating all of the documentation that surrounded the model, I began a search for participants. I was hoping to sign up at least a dozen of our senior leaders to act as mentors for some of the up-and-coming high potential managers and leaders within our organization. From the start of the development of this program, I had been working with my direct manager to ensure that the work I was doing remained in alignment with her vision of this program. At no point in time did she challenge any of the steps I had laid out, nor did she identify any potential issues that I may run into. However, once I started reaching out to senior leaders to gauge their interest in participating, I found out that they had recently been contacted by a colleague of mine to be a participant in a coaching program that he was developing. These senior leaders were confused about how these programs differed, and you know what, so was I! What makes this even worse is that this colleague and I shared a cubicle wall. We were just feet apart and we didn't know that our projects were so closely related. As it turns out, my manager had my colleague working on a coaching program with a similar target audience to the mentoring program she had me developing. The difference between the programs was that the coaching program was targeting individuals within the same operational areas at our organization, whereas my mentoring program was designed to work with people who were from different departments and cross-functionally for development. This difference wasn't initially apparent to our senior leaders, and my colleague and I were no help in clarifying the differences.

This is a huge problem for a number of reasons. The first major issue is that it made our whole team look incompetent. We are right next to each other, and we don’t know what we are working on. If we can’t figure out something as simple as communication on projects, can any of our client groups trust us to support them effectively? Additionally, it's inefficient for our organization to operate with this much overlap. We should have been a more unified team to better understand the work and know how we can complete projects more effectively. We could have worked together and drastically minimized some of the confusion around our programs.

So why do leaders behave this way? Why do they create silos and not share information across the team? The most common reason I have seen is because information is power. Oftentimes these leaders are controlling information in order to ensure that they remain needed and in charge. I have worked with leaders who are fearful that if they allow for too much collaboration amongst the team there will be nothing left for the manager to do and they could lose their job. The reality is that leaders need to lead (sound familiar?). Leaders need to focus on goal setting and the strategic direction of the team. By encouraging this collaboration among their team, they are actually adding more value to the organization and developing better employees, which should be the focus of leaders. Clearly communicating these goals will provide a framework for creativity and enable team members to channel their efforts effectively. Additionally, leaders can involve the team in the goal-setting process, allowing them to contribute their perspectives and insights, which can inspire innovative solutions and foster a sense of ownership.

Another thing that damages creativity is when leaders demonstrate a fear of failure. Many leaders are hesitant towards creativity and innovation because they are overly risk-averse and scared of failure. When leaders discourage taking risks or punish failures, it creates an environment where team members are hesitant to propose new ideas or challenge the status quo. I was once part of an organization that was restructuring its HR team after the retirement of a few key leaders. The organizational development (OD) team that I was on had a director who was retiring. Rather than hiring a new director for OD, our team was combined with the talent acquisition team under a new director that had just been appointed. This director had twenty-five years of experience with the organization. She started in an administrative support role fresh out of high school and worked her way up to the role of Talent Acquisition Manager, before being promoted to the director of our new combined team. From the onset of our time working with her it became very apparent that she did not have a strong understanding of the work that we did on the OD team. Her lack of understanding became a major issue for the OD team. This was a public service organization that was very hierarchical. Any programs that were developed needed to be reviewed and approved by an executive leadership team. Due to the hierarchical nature of the organization, it was a requirement of a director level role that they be the one to deliver presentations to the executive leadership team for approval. When we in the OD team would have a new idea, for example we were looking at implementing 360 reviews as part of our performance management tracking process, our new leader would shut down the idea. It didn't matter how well planned out the program was, or how much background and support information we would provide her, she would refuse to move these ideas forward for approval.

This was extremely frustrating because of all the effort and time we were putting into the different programs and the clear evidence of their effectiveness. Ultimately, we found out the reason she was so hesitant to put forward the innovative work that we were presenting her. It wasn't because she thought it was bad, or that she didn't believe in the work we were doing, it was because she was scared of failing. She was suffering from imposter syndrome. She had reached a level within the organization that she did not feel comfortable in because the vast majority of the people at that level had significantly more education and very different backgrounds than she had. She was worried because she knew that when presenting a program to the executive leadership group they always had follow up and clarification questions. She was fearful that if she was asked any questions about the programs we were working on she wouldn't be able to provide adequate responses because she didn't really understand the underlying concepts and design parameters. In her mind it was better to avoid the possibility of failure by simply not having the conversation.

While I am sharing this example, I do not want to imply that experience isn't valuable or that leaders must have technical expertise to be successful. Many of the problems in this situation were systemic in nature. Had the structure allowed for more collaboration with executive leadership or allowed for the inclusion of the OD team in the approval presentations then our leader would have felt more supported in those situations and would likely have been far more open to the innovation and creativity we were trying to push forward. In my example our leader was very dismissive as a result of her fear of failure, but it can manifest in other ways as well. For example, if a leader constantly criticizes mistakes or does not provide support during challenging times, it can stifle creativity and innovation. To overcome this, leaders should foster a culture that embraces failure as a learning opportunity. Encouraging calculated risks, providing support during setbacks, and celebrating efforts regardless of outcomes will create an environment where creativity can flourish. Leaders can lead by example, sharing their own failures and lessons learned, and creating a safe space for team members to experiment, take risks, and learn from both successes and failures.

The final error I often see that hurts creativity and innovation is not necessarily something that one person does wrong, but rather an organizational issue regarding the technology and infrastructure they have in place. Outdated technology or inadequate infrastructure can hinder creativity by limiting access to resources or tools necessary for innovation. For instance, if a team lacks modern software or hardware required for their work, it can impede their ability to think creatively or implement innovative solutions.

I was working on a classification and compensation project for a client where they were looking to align roles across their company into structured salary bands with effective classification and naming conventions. This was the first step they were looking to complete towards better talent management in their organization. They wanted to continue to evolve and develop competency tracking, career pathing, and performance management as a part of the future vision. These had many creative ideas about how they could utilize this information to greatly improve the working environment for their staff.

As we started to gather the information we need to complete this program, we were shocked by what we found. Depending on what role and location a new employee was hired for, their information (name, title, start date, salary, etc.) had to be manually entered into as many as eight separate systems. For context, this company was regularly hiring between fifteen and thirty new staff per week. It started with the onboarding process. They were sent modules to complete prior to their start date. These utilized a third party Learning Management System that included background checks. Then the new employee needed to be entered into the HR information system to create their employee file. From there they were manually entered into a payroll and time tracking system. The next system was the third party benefits management company that they used; the new employee’s information needed to be entered there as well. This organization was industrial in nature and had strong Occupational Health and Safety policies and practices in place, and you guessed it, they needed to be entered into a separate system for OHS. The vast majority of roles were remote and operated on rotational schedules, so the employee would need to be entered into the scheduling system. The remote nature of the work meant that there were different methods of transportation to get to certain locations, including driving yourself, buses, trains, and flights, so there was a logistics system that the employee needed to be included in. The final system was for internal development and training. There was an internal Learning Management System that was used for that purpose. The most amazing thing was that none of those eight systems were set up to be integrated into any of the others. It was all done with manual reporting and data entry. Does this make your head hurt as much as mine?

I asked the HR director a simple question. How many employees do you have working here? Her response was “It depends where we look. I typically go by payroll numbers but those can be off too.” I was shocked that they didn't have accurate headcount information, but quickly came to understand why. When we started to try and reconcile their headcount numbers, we found discrepancies of over 15% in some of the systems. I had to tell this client that there was nothing we could do from a Talent Management standpoint until they were able to sort their system issues out. As creative and innovative as their ideas were, there was no way they were going to be successful until they had a handle on all of their systems. Technology can be a catalyst to creativity and innovation, but the wrong technology can equally hinder these efforts. Leaders should invest in the necessary technology and infrastructure to support their team's creative endeavors. Providing access to cutting-edge tools and resources will empower team members to explore new ideas and push the boundaries of innovation. Additionally, leaders can stay updated with emerging technologies and identify opportunities to leverage them for the team's benefit, ensuring that the team has the necessary tools and resources to unleash their creative potential.

As we wrap up our exploration into the realm of creativity pitfalls, Chapter 3 has delved into the dance between fostering creativity and maintaining essential boundaries in the workplace. The ever-evolving nature of the working world demands leaders who can navigate change while inspiring innovation within their teams.

The ideas that I am sharing are meant to emphasizes the delicate balance between structure and creativity. Lorne Michaels' assertion that "there is no creativity without boundaries" resonates deeply in art and leadership. We acknowledge the necessity of structure; the container within which we operate, consisting of client deliverables, budgets, and organizational requirements. Within these confines lies opportunity for creativity to flourish.

This chapter exposed a prevalent leadership mistake, micromanagement, a creativity stifler and team morale dampener. We do not want to find ourselves in the situation of the well-intentioned leader, striving to provide autonomy to a remote team, only to reveal the unintended consequences of too much space without a defined container. The equilibrium between freedom and structure, as we discovered, is crucial in fostering creativity.

Communication emerges as a recurring theme, with its impact on being varied and far reaching. From leaders who unintentionally withhold vital information, hindering the team's understanding of goals, to those who claim an "open-door policy" but fall short in availability, clear communication, or its lack, significantly influences a team's creative potential.

We can really see the importance of alignment. Leaders must not only set SMART goals but ensure these goals resonate with the organization's mission and vision. A mission statement, often underestimated, should guide the team's creative pursuits, forming a foundation for strategic direction.

Fear of failure, a common stumbling block, manifests in leaders who shy away from innovation due to imposter syndrome or risk aversion. The idea of an experienced leader sabotaging creative initiatives out of fear reflects the broader organizational challenge of fostering a culture that welcomes failure as a steppingstone to success.

The final thread woven into this chapter is the impact of technology on creativity. Outdated systems and insufficient infrastructure can act as roadblocks to innovation, hindering the very potential they should unleash. Our journey revealed a stark example of how a lack of integrated technology impeded a talent management program, emphasizing the critical role of technological support in driving creativity.

As we conclude this chapter, let's carry forward the lessons learned, the balance between structure and creativity, the pivotal role of effective communication, the alignment of goals with a broader mission, the need for a culture that embraces failure, and the importance of investing in technology. These insights lay the groundwork for leaders to foster environments where creativity can thrive, ensuring teams not only meet but exceed their potential in the ever-evolving workplace landscape.

CHAPTER 4 - SUCCESSION MANAGEMENT

I teased it earlier in the book and here we are, let's discuss succession planning. Developing leadership capacity is a great first step towards creating a succession plan within your organization. I work with a lot of organizations to create succession plans, typically starting with their leadership positions. Succession planning is often seen as a big daunting change that may be difficult for some companies to wrap their head around. Succession planning certainly can be a complicated process, but I think the best way to sum it up is with three distinct steps. Identifying critical roles, assessing current talent, and developing a talent pipeline. Some succession planning programs may include all kinds of bells and whistles, but at their foundation they are accomplishing these three steps.

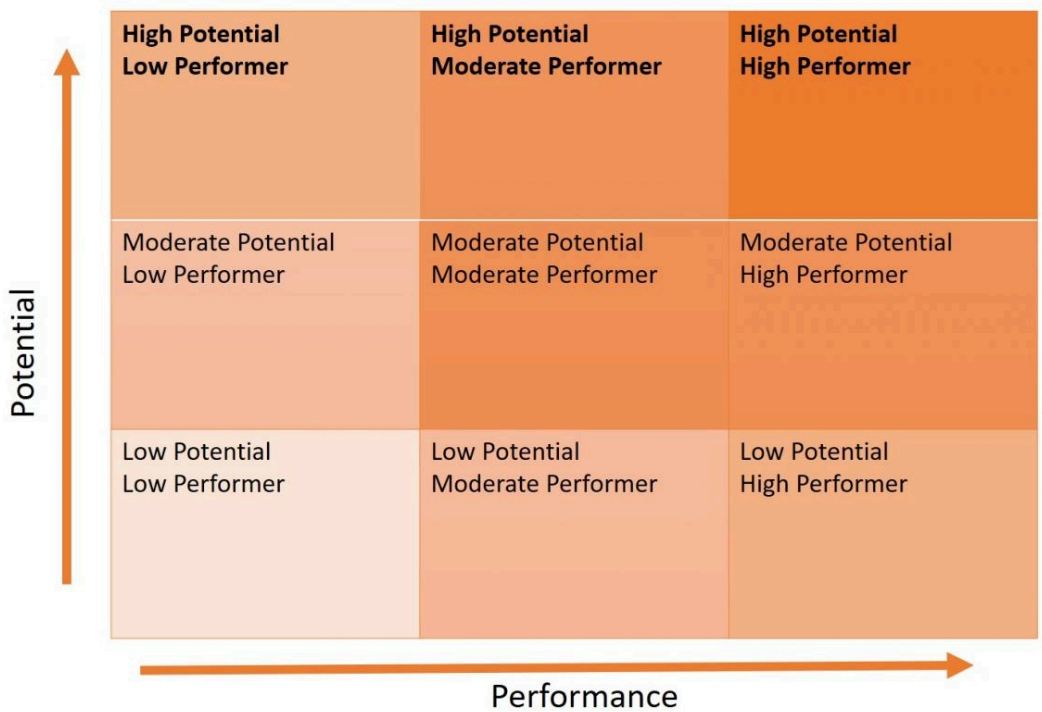
The first thing that needs to be done is to identify critical roles. The focus is not necessarily on the individual in the roles, but the function of the roles themselves. The best way to understand if a role is critical is to ask yourself the following question. If this role became vacant, would there be a significant and immediate impact on the operations, outcomes, or ability to execute the strategic plan of the organization? Understanding which roles are critical to our organization tells us what type and how many successors we may need. This step is often a tough one for leaders. When we ask them to evaluate which roles on their team are critical, they tend to default to a response of "all of them are critical." While I can appreciate that they feel their team members are all important, the reality is that not all roles are critical. I will often have to push back and have them take a deeper dive into the level of expertise required for the role, the availability of external candidates for the role, and the track record of developing internal candidates for this role. If this role is traditionally difficult to fill, and the last time it was vacant there were significant challenges to meet operational needs, then yes, calling the role critical is likely correct. However, sometimes leaders have gone three to six months without someone in a role, without any major disruption to their operations, and when they did go to fill it they found several qualified candidates in relatively short order. As much as you may like the individual in that role, the role itself may not be critical to the organization. Leaders often worry that if a role that reports to them is seen as "non-critical" then they may lose the headcount from their team. It is important to be clear from the start that the purpose of identifying critical roles is for succession planning purposes only.

There is one other factor to consider when identifying critical roles, and that is the likelihood of vacancy. If it is known that a role will be vacant in the near future, we may want to consider the role critical because we know a successor will be needed. It can be difficult to predict when a role may be vacant. The two most common ways that we know a role will be vacated are retirement and long-term leaves (i.e. maternity or parental leave.) Typically, people who are nearing retirement or will be taking a leave of absence will inform their leader of their plans. This may be the sign to start looking for a successor from within your talent pipeline.

That leads to the next step in the process, assessing your talent to understand the current state of your talent pipeline. This step is by far the most important step in the process. The whole point of succession planning is to develop strong future leaders for your company. To do so we absolutely need to understand where we stand with our current employees. All employees are not created equal, and they have different strengths, areas for growth, and career aspirations. The talent assessment process helps us understand where our employees are at in their career, it tells us what capacity they have for growth in key competencies, and it gives us the foundation we need to create development plans that will help our employees maximize their career with our organization.

Talent assessments can vary a great deal from organization to organization. When we are focused on succession planning the two main areas of focus are Employee Performance and Employee Potential. How are these employees performing in their current role, and do we see them being successful in expanded roles in the future? That is what we are trying to uncover through the talent assessment process. This can be done with existing performance management systems, competency tracking systems, learning management systems, personality assessments, 360 reviews, and a whole range of other programs and practices.

The best organizations will often have some sort of ranking system that categorizes people into groups based on the results of the evaluations of their performance and potential. A common tool used is a nine-box model. Potential is listed on one axis of a chart and performance on the other, then individuals are plotted based on their results.



Someone who is a high performer and has high potential would be placed in the box at the top right corner. Someone who is average in both measures would find themselves in the middle box of the chart. This is just one example of how companies visualize their talent pipeline. There are 16 box models, there are linear spectrum models, and there are cyclical models that I have used before too. Regardless of which model you choose, there is one key consideration that needs to be done correctly to increase the effectiveness of your talent assessment process. That consideration is *consistency*.

When we are evaluating performance and/or potential of two or more employees, we will have more success if we ask the same questions or use the same processes to determine where they currently stand. When we aren't using a consistent process, we significantly increase the likelihood of bias skewing the results. While there is always going to be a bit of subjectivity and opinion in the talent assessment process, consistency and structure can help us remove some of the personal bias of those conducting the assessments.

This ties nicely into the overarching theme of this book, leadership mistakes. The biggest mistake I have seen related to succession management is rater error. To put it another way, some companies create their processes in a way that allows for the leaders conducting the assessments to make errors, include bias, or even discriminate against individuals that they are assessing.

Many years ago I was working for an organization that was creating and implementing a succession management program for the first time. My team and I were working with our senior leadership team to build the process and timeline to put our top three levels of leaders through a leadership talent assessment. This included all VPs, who would be assessed by the CEO, all Directors, who would be assessed by their VPs and all managers, who would be assessed by their directors. We created a workbook that asked a series of leadership related questions designed to better understand both the performance and potential of the individual being assessed. Based on the answers provided the individual would be assigned a score for both performance and potential and be plotted on a 9-box grid. During the first phase we worked with the CEO to evaluate the six VPs in our company. The overall results looked pretty strong. All VPs were seen as good to great leaders, and they all had moderate or high potential for expanded leadership opportunities. They were all in the top three categories on the 9-box.

We then worked with the six VPs to complete talent assessments for the directors that reported to them. In total there were twenty-two directors that we assessed. This was where our results started to take a turn for the worse. Of the twenty-two directors evaluated, only three fell into the top three categories of the 9-box. The rest sat in areas that were seen as "meets expectations" at best, and fifteen directors were seen as low performers in their role or as having low leadership potential. This was a big problem for a couple of reasons. On the surface the first major issue was the overall leadership strength of our organization was clearly lacking. That in and of itself is a big concern. As I have been pointing out throughout this book, poor leadership can be a cause of many problems for an organization such as high turnover, increased employee relations issues, increased absenteeism, labor grievances, recruitment and attraction challenges, and much more. My concerns with the results were more closely related to the talent assessment process.

Our CEO had committed to very specific timelines to complete assessments for all three levels of leaders, but once we had received the result of the director assessments, I wanted to pause the process at that point and re-evaluate our strategy. We were headed down a path that would have led to significant rater error. My concern was that by continuing as planned, with the directors evaluating the managers below them, we were putting ourselves in a situation where the talent assessment would likely be inaccurate and even potentially harmful to our organization. Why? Because of rater error. We were asking the directors to evaluate the leadership performance and potential of the managers below them, even though we had just established that at least fifteen of the directors were not strong leaders themselves.

Why would we trust someone who we know lacks the leadership skills and competencies we desire to evaluate someone else on those exact same competencies? It was a flawed design. I used to work with a data analyst who would always use the term “garbage in, garbage out.” Basically, if you have to make assessments or decisions based on bad information there is a strong chance your decisions will be bad too. The process itself allowed far too much bias and error from the rater who completing the assessment. The solution I proposed was to implement a 360-degree feedback process. I suggested we still have the directors complete an assessment, but we also have the employee evaluate themselves with the same form. We would also ask all direct reports of each manager to complete an assessment. To complete the process, we would invite a small number of the manager's peers and/or clients to complete an assessment. The idea behind the 360 assessment is that it gives us multiple data points on which to evaluate a leader. If all involved raters score a person more or less the same, we can feel confident the evaluation is accurate.

For example, let's assume our assessment provides a score from 1, low performer, low potential to 10, high performer, high potential. If one of our managers evaluates themselves highly (say 7.5), and their direct reports and their clients all score them similarly (say all 7s and 8s), but the director they report to completes an assessment and scores them a 3.5, we have an issue. In this case we can look a little more closely at the assessments, but it's fair to assume that we have rater error. Chances are our director's score is not an accurate representation of this manager's performance. Everyone else thinks the manager is performing at a high level, but the director clearly doesn't feel the same, they see them as low performers with limited potential. This would be a signal that further investigation into the ratings is required. Was this one of our poor performing directors? It would be something that could be taken up a level of leadership to land on a final assessment score. 360 evaluations are a great check and balance to help remove bias and incompetence from the talent assessment process. We need accurate assessment to put our organization in the best possible position to create a strong succession plan.

This leads directly to our third and final step, creating a talent pipeline. In step one we discovered which roles were critical to our company, in step two we identified our high performing, high potential talent, in step 3 we are bridging the gap between the first two steps. The question I ask of clients for step 3 is pretty simple. What needs to be done to ensure that we have existing talent ready, willing, and able to fill our critical roles as they become vacant? Seems simple right? Like most things, it's not that easy. For an organization to be successful in creating a talent pipeline there are a number of things that need to be in place.

The first thing we need to have is enough high potential employees. A well-done development assessment process (step 2 above) will provide us with an understanding of how many high potential leaders we currently have as well as a timeframe for when they will be ready for an expanded role. If the number of ready-now employees is below the forecasted critical role vacancies, then our talent pipeline will not suffice. So, what do we do when this happens?

It all starts with calculating what our shortcomings will be. We need to understand if we have just a couple of roles that we think will be vacant or if we looking at a large number of positions. This number is going to greatly affect our steps moving forward. If we only have a few more upcoming vacancies than we have high potential employees, we can consider some accelerated development plans to bridge that gap. We can look to identify individuals who are close to being ready and push them a little bit quicker into these future roles. This may include giving them some extra support to get them ready, giving them some extra development, or throwing some money at the problem, so to speak.

When we run into a situation where we have a large number of expected vacancies and nowhere near enough qualified employees to fill those, we have a much bigger problem. It likely means we are going to need to put some sort of recruitment plan in place to successfully navigate the issue.

I was working with an engineering firm a while back and they actually had six of their nine vice president level employees eligible for retirement all in under one year's time. This was a major risk for the organization as they had not begun succession planning. They were not confident that they had anyone in their organization ready, willingm and able to take on one of these VP roles successfully. With this issue, they had no choice but to look externally. It was too big of a risk to promote junior-level employees into these VP roles without the necessary training, development, and preparation to be successful. This meant that they needed budget and time to do an extensive, targeted recruitment process to bring in new leaders and get them up to speed and operational before all of their existing VPs were gone. It was a costly process, but one that was worth the expense to ensure they did not fail in the short term. It also signaled their need to develop an internal succession planning process that I got to help them create to ensure they didn't find themselves in a similar situation ever again.

This leads to the second important thing we need to create a talent pipeline─budget. Employee development has a cost associated with it. Whether it's formal education programs, coaches and mentors, or access to new functions and streams of business inside the organization, there is a dollar or time cost associated with all development opportunities. Some of these costs are easier to calculate than others. training programs, certificates, designations, are all fairly regulated and consistent. Anyone can go online right now, do a quick search, and have a pretty good estimate of what the cost would be to send someone to obtain their MBA, CPA, CPHR or any other designation.

Where costs become more complex is when we start looking at internal development opportunities. One of the best programs I've ever been a part of was an eighteen month internal cross training program. Four leaders who were all identified as high potential successors were put together in a group and spent six months working in each other's roles. Over the course of those eighteen months, they had the opportunity for on the job, practical learning in a variety of positions. Because they were in a group together they were also able to support the other individuals in the program with their former role. It was an opportunity to learn new skill sets and learn a new part of the business while at the same time allowing them to coach and develop other peers in an existing role they were familiar with. This program was very successful. However, there was a cost associated with it that not everyone thinks about right off the top.

In theory, this program has no cost to it because we are already paying these individuals to work for us. However, upon further investigation you realize that an individual placed in a new role is not going to be able to function at the same level right off the bat as the employee they are replacing. Inevitably we end up in a situation where multiple people are supporting a function in order for it to get completed. This program required some overlap of duties and cross training, both of which have a cost to the organization. Essentially, we are paying two people to do the same job for short periods of time. While this is a lot cheaper than some external programs, there is still a cost involved. This is often known as opportunity cost. Leaders sometimes think that if they are paying you a salary already, then having you complete tasks outside your normal scope of work isn't costing the company any money. Opportunity cost basically states, if your time is being spent on these new tasks, then which of your normal tasks aren't you doing?

I once worked for a manager that did not have a firm grasp on opportunity cost. Our organization had just rolled out a new competency model and our team was tasked with tracking what level our leaders were at currently within each competency as well as how they were progressing. My manager's first instinct was to procure an existing software package designed for just such a task. Unfortunately, for what we were looking for the cost was going to be close to $60,000. Our leadership was not willing to spend that kind of money so my manager needed to find alternative options. She worked with our internal IT department and found someone who was able to develop a tracking app internally that would do exactly what we needed. She put together a proposal stating that we could build the app for less than $5,000 all in. That covered some hardware and software needed to develop the app. Her timeline was eight months, and she came to me to ask me to take the lead on the project. When I saw her proposal, I pushed back and told her that the cost was significantly more than the 5k she budgeted. She wanted me to spend 50% of my time working with the app developer, who would also be spending 50% of their time on the project. I tried to explain opportunity cost to her by pointing out that if half of our time was spent on this project, then half of our salary should be counted in the costs. If we are working on this project, we aren't going to be doing other projects. That is the opportunity cost. Additionally, our original work wasn't going away, so our teams would be tasked with picking up the slack in our work. Her thought process was that our salaries were already accounted for, so there was no need to include that in the proposal. Unfortunately for her, our senior leadership team saw things the same way I did, and they immediately asked why "both 'her' team and IT had an employee just sitting around doing nothing half the time?" That is not an exaggeration or embellishment at all, it's a direct quote. I was at the meeting, and it was suuuuper awkward. She had no good response as they started to explain why she needed to learn more about how to budget a project.

The next consideration when creating a talent pipeline is buy in. We need the leaders in our organization to support the development of their team members. Leaders need to lead! A program like the cross training one I outlined doesn't work if the leaders of the participants don't support them in spending eighteen months learning. If any of their leaders felt that the disruption to service, operations, or effectiveness for their team was too great then they may not allow their direct reports to participate. For external training programs there typically needs to be some type of supervisory approval in order to get access to funds to cover the costs. If your direct supervisor is not supportive of your development, you're probably not going to be able to develop at the rate the organization needs.

This is a really common mistake I see leaders making. They don't necessarily understand that their job as a leader is developing the people who report to them. They are focused on the short term. These leaders can sometimes feel as though *I have trained this individual, I have made this individual successful in their role and therefore they should stay here forever. I should benefit from their newfound skills, talents, etc.* While understandable, this is a bit of a selfish approach. As an organization we want to reward these individuals who have gained new skills and we want to help them progress in their career. In turn, we want to reward and acknowledge the efforts of our senior leaders who are doing a great job developing our talent pipeline.

I remember a time years ago when I sat right across the hall from a fellow manager in our HR shop. One of her team members had applied for an internal role and been the successful candidate selected to move into a management position. If we were developing a talent pipeline properly this is something that should be celebrated, that should be seen as a great opportunity for that individual and as a sign that their leader did a great job developing them. However, this particular manager did not see things that way. What I heard from across the hall was a very heated discussion that started with this manager yelling the words "how dare you do this to me!" She felt that this individual accepting a role in another area within our organization was a direct slight on her after all the efforts that she had put into developing this individual. I'm sure I don't need to remind you of this, but… as a leader you should never yell at your team. I certainly can understand where this manager's frustrations came from, but yelling accusatory statements at your employee is not going to make anything better.

To avoid these types of situations it's important that senior leaders in the organization do a really good job of relaying the importance of development and the importance of creating a talent pipeline. Existing leaders should be rewarded for creating new leaders within our organization. When building performance metrics with clients, the development of employees is one that I always push for. I think it's important to know which of your existing leaders is doing their part to prepare employees for advancement within the company.

The final thing that we need in place to successfully develop a talent pipeline is people who want to progress their career. That might seem pretty straightforward, but many organizations make the assumption that everyone wants to be promoted. This isn't always the case. There are people who reach a level in their career and that is as far as they want to go. They aren't chasing a manager role; they aren't looking for any additional responsibilities or accountabilities.

I was doing some work with a healthcare organization a few years back that was really struggling to find operational level leaders in their hospital facilities. Through the talent assessment process, they had identified quite a few high potential, high performing individuals that would have been a great fit for leadership positions. However, every time they approached these individuals about taking a step forward in their career, those individuals turned down the opportunity. It wasn't because these individuals were lazy, or unmotivated, it was simply because it didn't make sense for them in their careers at that point in time.

The way the organization was structured, moving from a position such as a registered nurse into a role within management meant leaving the bargaining unit they were a part of. While on paper the management role paid more money and offered better benefits and perks, in reality, because of the nature of the union agreement, for many of them accepting the management role would ultimately lead to less money, more hours, more responsibility, and far more stress in their life. Depending on their seniority level within the union they had quite a bit of flexibility around their shift schedule, hours of work, and ultimately the pay they were able to make based on shift premiums. I think if you approach anyone on the street and said, “Hey, how would you like to make 20% lower salary, work quite a few more hours with no overtime pay, and be responsible for a lot of impactful and difficult decisions,” you would get a lot of people who would say, “No thanks, I'm good.” This is a very relatable and understandable reaction. This is why we talk about ready and able through our talent assessment process, but we don't want to forget about the willing piece.

I know for me personally, I have turned down a senior level leadership role because it would have meant I would no longer have project leadership as part of my role. The promotion would have meant spending most of my time supporting our board of directors and working on financials. I really enjoy project work, and at that point in my career, I had no desire to move away from it. There can be a whole host of reasons why someone is happy in their current role. Rather than concern ourselves with getting them to change their minds, we should let them remain happy and productive for our organization and focus our efforts elsewhere. Thinking back to the 9-box model, there is nothing wrong with having employees who are high performers with low potential. People with no desire to advance ultimately have low potential to move up in the company, but they still bring a ton of value to their current role and team.

If your organization has a succession management program in place, then you are certainly ahead of the game. However, just because you have a program in place doesn't necessarily mean that it's effective. If you are identifying critical roles, assessing your talent effectively, and bridging those gaps to create a talent pipeline, then there's a good chance that your succession management program will be effective.

Once an organization has all the foundational pieces of succession management in place, there is one thing they need to remember to do in order to be successful. Similar to what we've discussed before, it revolves around communication. All of the practices that we have just discussed could be considered behind-the-scenes actions. It's our senior leadership and some middle management who are responsible for completing these processes. Even the individual employees who may be identified as high potentials aren't all that involved in the bulk of what has been done. They may have completed a self-assessment, or been a part of a 360 assessment, but in all likelihood, they don't necessarily know all the details of the program and certainly they won't know the results.

This begs the question, do employees need to know the results of a succession management program? This answer to this question is a mistake that many leaders get wrong. It's a tough question, because I think the answer is not quite as simple as yes or no. There may be situations where results are not shared. This is common when the results of the performance and potential assessments are not particularly strong. Organizations may choose to keep these results quite private. There are also going to be situations and individuals who should be informed of the results.

I had a client who had gone through succession management for the first time. They had identified all their high potentials and all of their critical roles, and they started to formulate a plan to ensure that critical vacancies would be filled effectively by trained and qualified individuals. If you are thinking, "that sounds great, why did they need to hire you then?" you are not alone. That was the same thought I had. Unfortunately, when the time came a few months down the road and the critical role vacancies began to arise, several of the identified high potential employees had already moved on from the organization. When I was sitting with some senior leaders evaluating their succession management program, trying to help them determine why they weren't able to successfully move identified high potentials into critical roles, I uncovered the likely cause of their issue.

There was one particular leader I was working with who was especially disappointed that the two highest potential individuals on his team had left the organization. I asked him to tell me about those individuals and why he felt so strongly about their future potential. He went on for a while raving about the quality of their work, their attitudes towards both their job and the organization, and the competencies and agility they showed that would lend itself well to advancement within the organization. He finished the conversation by stating that “either one of those individuals would have been a phenomenal replacement for me. It's such a shame that they didn't stick around long enough for us to put them in that role.” After he had finished explaining the attributes of these two particular individuals, I asked him about how the conversation went when he discussed their performance and told them about the potential he saw in them and how they could go so far as to replace him at a senior level. His response was alarming. His eyes got wide and the smile that had be present on his face the whole time we had been talking about these two employees slowly melted away. After a long inhale and an even more pronounced exhale, he said, “I never told them.”

That's right, he had never taken the time to sit down with them and talk about their potential. When I pressed him for his reasoning behind this lack of communication, he looked disappointed and said that he didn't want to be seen as "playing favorites.” This was unfortunate. I asked why he was so concerned about the appearance of playing favorites. His big concern was that he didn't want to be seen as a leader who didn’t treat everyone on his team fairly. It turned out this was a similar sentiment for many of the leaders in their organization. I had to explain to them that while I can appreciate the idea of fairness on their teams, there is a need to better understand the concept of fairness in the workplace. The reality is that a workplace isn't built on the concept of fairness. We all have different backgrounds, experiences, levels of education, etc., and we are in roles that differ. We don't all add our salaries into one pool and divide it up evenly. There are lots of differentiating factors that exist in an organization.

I want to clearly state that I am not advocating for favoritism or saying that if you feel that you are being treated unfairly you should just suck it up and deal with it. Unwarranted favoritism/nepotism is a real concern for many organizations and unfair treatment can be a sign of major issues such as discrimination, racism, bullying, etc. What I am saying is our focus should be on program fairness. Everyone should be included in our programs, whether it’s development programs, performance management programs, talent assessments, or any other internal program, we must ensure everyone is included. If people are fairly and accurately assessed, then we are not playing favorites. We are using the data and information gathered to make decisions based on the results of the information we have gathered.

This leader should have had conversations with all their staff and provided feedback on how each team member is doing in their role. How are they performing, what development opportunities exist, and what they are looking for in their career. This conversation should include letting them know that they demonstrate high potential for the organization and explaining what the succession management process looks like in your organization and what it means for them. You are not being unfair, you are not playing favorites, you are simply doing your duty as a leader to prepare individuals who are ready, willing, and able, for advancement within the organization.

There is no guarantee that if this manager had conducted these conversations these two high potential employees still would have been with the company when the time came to promote. There was no exit interview data or anything that showed why they left, but most of us do like to hear praise. We like to know that our hard work is being noticed. We like to hear that someone sees great potential in us, and when we do hear this, we are more likely to want to stay and grow in an environment where we feel appreciated.

In this chapter, we have delved into the intricacies of Succession Management, breaking down the process into three vital steps: identifying critical roles, assessing existing talent, and constructing a talent pipeline. Succession planning is a critical skill for leaders to understand to ensure that they are focusing on the development of their team and most importantly, they are putting people in a position to succeed.

I have described succession management in three easy steps, but the reality is that there are many layers of complexity within each of those steps and succession management needs to be more than just a process that exists. Succession management needs planning, structure, budget, understanding, buy-in at all levels, and commitment to be as effective as possible.

Unfortunately for many leaders the true importance of succession planning isn't understood until they lose a valuable member of their team. The sting of losing your best employee to another organization because they don't see or feel the opportunity to advance within your organization can be an eye opening moment for many leaders. I do think it is great that these leaders often learn the importance of succession from the departure of an key employee, I hope this chapter helps you avoid the need to learn this same lesson first hand.

CHAPTER 5 - DEVELOPMENT

The next area where I see many mistakes being made by leaders is in the development, or lack thereof, of their employees. We have talked already about how developing their direct reports is a critical part of any leader's role, and we have even touched on some of the ways they may do this through the succession management process. Now, we are going to go into greater detail about what specifically leaders are getting wrong when it comes to development.

At the most basic level, a common mistake made by leaders is failure to create career development opportunities for their employees. When leaders fail to invest in their employees' professional growth, they risk losing talented individuals to other organizations that support development and provide better growth opportunities. As mentioned before, I have created dozens of leadership performance management programs for clients, and I always make sure that one of the metrics that we are tracking and assessing for each leader is how well are they developing the members of their team. Developing the individuals who report directly to you should always be a priority of anyone in a leadership role.

I truly believe that development should be available for all employees in any organization, but the reality is that every employee has a different floor and ceiling. Development is more or less a linear process, there are stages along the way that employees must progress through. If you have an employee who has been with you for a couple of years and their performance has been relatively mediocre, nothing terrible, but also nothing that makes them stand out, what is the likelihood that they will be a top performer in the next six months? Is it possible? Sure, anything is possible, but in all likelihood there will be a progression from mediocre to slightly above average, then they may become very efficient and effective at their role and eventually they may be exceptional. It takes time. I often get asked if we should spend time developing all employees or just focus on the high potential individuals. My answer is a resounding yes, develop everyone! Having a team member go from performance liability to meeting expectations shows your value as a leader as much as having a team member go from above average to exceptional. It may not have quite as big of an impact on the organization, but it can do wonders for improving the culture of your team. Development aims to raise the performance floor for all employees, not just their ceilings.

As you may have guessed by now, I have seen many leaders who struggle with creating development opportunities. The most common issue I see when it comes to creating development opportunities is that leaders simply don't understand the most effective way to develop someone. This is such a shame because they are not actively trying to stifle development and oftentimes the opposite is true, they think they are doing an effective job of supporting their team members, but it's a lack of understanding that is the root cause of the issue. Think back to the parachute dilemma that occurs with new leaders. Not having the knowledge you will need prior to being placed in challenging situations is a daunting proposition. One of the most common issue we see when there is a lack of preparation and training prior to becoming a leader is the lack of understanding around how to develop an employee effectively. What these leaders don't understand is that learning is complex, and a one size fits all approach rarely works. There is a widely recognized framework for structuring learning and development known as the 70-20-10 learning model. This model states that individuals tend to learn best through a combination of three distinct types of learning: Experiential, Social and Formal.

Experiential learning emphasizes that the majority of learning occurs through hands-on, practical experiences in the workplace. Think of this as the “learn by doing” category. Experiential learning includes new tasks, projects, and day-to-day activities that individuals engage in as part of their current job roles. The concept of emphasizing experiential learning was popularized by researchers Morgan McCall, Robert W. Eichinger, and Michael M. Lombardo at the Center for Creative Leadership in the 1990s. They conducted a study that suggested the majority of learning occurs informally and experientially. Their work recommends that for learning to be most effective, 70% of it should be experiential. When I am working with clients to create new development plans there are a few experiential learning options that I tend to recommend.

The first option is job rotations. Job rotations are structured and scheduled plans where employees are given opportunities to work in different roles or departments to gain diverse experiences. Job rotations are short in nature typically, but leaders are supportive of them because they cause minimal disruption to operations. Often, we do this as a swap of two or more employees, so while a leader may lose a team member for a short time, they get a new individual in return and they get to participate in this new individual's development. I detailed a similar, and very effective, program that consisted of an eighteen month rotation in the last chapter.

The next common form of experiential learning is on-the-job training. This can include activities such as apprenticeships, shadowing, and mentoring programs that are used to facilitate learning within the context of actual work. I have used this method on HR teams extensively. Shadowing a more experienced HR team member as they conduct an interview or lead an employee relations investigation is one of the best ways to truly understand the process. It doesn't matter how much you've prepared, if you have never had the opportunity to shadow or support a termination then you will likely be shocked by the emotion and challenges that can occur when you are firing someone the first time. On-the-job training is great for preparing high potentials for the challenges that may come as they progress in their career. The biggest challenge to on-the-job training typically comes down to resources. If you are spending your time shadowing a more experienced employee, then who is doing the work that is required of your role? This one can be tricky to use extensively because it can be seen as paying two people to do one job. There is that pesky opportunity cost again!

If you have a senior leadership group that fully supports growth and development, then you shouldn't run into too many issues.

One other option that I will often recommend to support experiential learning is stretch assignments. This process involves assigning tasks that challenge employees to step outside their comfort zones and develop new skills. Typically stretch assignments are done in addition to their existing workload. It's important that we allocate enough time to support these stretch assignments without potentially overworking or burning out employees. Stretch assignments are a great way to give an individual a hands-on taste of different skills and practices that will benefit both them and the organization in the long run. Sometimes this can be as simple as having an employee act in a leadership capacity to cover a vacation or attend a couple of meetings as a representative for your department.

Experiential learning is at the 70 percent mark because it is the most effective way for individuals to learn new skills. Having the ability to see what needs to be done in the moment and practice it in a real-world environment is something that will benefit almost everyone learning new skills.

This leads to the second method in the 70-20-10 model, social learning. Social learning focuses on learning from others. This can be done through interactions with colleagues, mentors, coaching, or participation in social learning environments. Social learning is driven by activities that encourage collaboration and knowledge sharing. The concept of social learning has roots in the work of a psychologist named Albert Bandura, who proposed that individuals learn from observing others. His work was translated to workplace settings by well-known researchers such as Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave. Individuals will typically learn best when they can spend 20% of the learning time dedicated to social based learning. When an organization starts to actively improve its workplace culture, we often see a similar rise in social learning. There is more conversation, interaction, and collaboration, which creates an environment where social learning can thrive.

Mentoring is the most common method that I recommend to create social learning. Mentoring involves pairing less experienced employees with more seasoned colleagues to provide guidance, support, and feedback. The best mentoring programs are not random. For a mentoring program to be successful it is always a good idea to put time and effort into crafting strong and intentional pairings. The best pairing should not be from within the same team. The general rules that I build into most mentoring programs are that all mentors are at least two classifications higher than the mentee and from a different department or working group. The purpose of this is to ensure that the mentoring conversations are not about performance in the mentee's current role, but rather, focused on future roles and aspirations. I have had the most success creating mentoring programs where the potential mentees are required to fill out an application of sorts. It goes over what they are looking to gain from the relationship and what type of information and development they are looking to gain from the process. This helps us find a mentor that will be the best possible fit to support their learning.

Another strong option for creating social learning opportunities is through the use of communities of practice. A community of practice is a forum or platform where employees can discuss and share knowledge about specific topics or areas of expertise. Common communities of practice that we see in organizations are ones related to occupational health and safety, employee engagement, new hire onboarding, and innovation. Communities of practice allow employees to share thoughts and ideas with a group of their peers from other departments within the organization. I actually got my start working in Organizational Development thanks in large part to a community of practice. I was working in an HR generalist role focused primarily on employee relations incident investigations. I was given the opportunity to sit on a shared services (HR, Finance, Marketing, Safety and Communications) community of practice regarding the onboarding and orientation experience in our organization. Through this community of practice, I developed relationships with several members of the OD team, and I learned about their role in the development of large-scale organizational programs. I was able to start supporting that team more and more as I continued to learn about their work. About nine months later they were recruiting for a new consultant on the OD team and I applied. My time spent learning about their processes and programs as a part of the community of practice was integral in me being the successful candidate for the role. Social Learning for the win!

When we can create situations where employees can spend 20% of their learning time in social settings, we greatly improve the likelihood that they will retain the information and be able to apply it when the time comes. The added benefit of social learning is the relationships that are developed through the time spent in social learning settings.

For those of you who excel at math, you will know that we still have 10% of our learning methods to go. The final learning method is formal learning. Formal learning encompasses structured learning experiences that are typically designed and delivered by educational institutions or corporate training programs. This is the type of learning that most of us are quite familiar with. It is your typical 'book learning.' It's what you are doing right now! Examples of formal learning that I have used include workshops and seminars that are instructor-led and that cover specific topics or skills. Some organizations will have subscriptions for online learning platforms that offer self-paced learning courses or texts for employees to access as they have the time. Many organizations may also support their employees in enrolling in formal certification programs related to their roles or industries. This can include degree programs, diploma programs, designations, and other formal programs. There is a lot of value to formal education and learning, but as the 70-20-10 model displays, formal education on its own may not be the most effective.

There are several major organizations that have implemented the 70-20-10 model as part of its leadership development programs. General Electric has used a combination of on-the-job experiences, coaching, and formal training to develop leaders. Pfizer utilized the 70-20-10 model to enhance learning and development for its sales force. This involved a mix of experiential learning, coaching, and formal training. McDonald's applied the 70-20-10 model in their training programs for employees at all levels. They combined on-the-job training, mentoring, and formal workshops to provide a comprehensive learning experience.

With an understanding of the 70-20-10 model, I want to transition to the most common mistake I see leaders make when the time comes to develop their teams and that is an overreliance on one type of learning. Typically, the one that is most commonly over relied upon is formal learning. Formal learning is usually relatively cheap, relatively fast, and usually quite easy to organize and implement. This is why so many leaders prioritize formal learning.

I was working on the development of a succession management program with a client in the commercial construction industry. They relied heavily on formal learning in their development plans. They had gone as far as to internalize the formal learning and create an in-house "college" branded to their organization. The courses were primarily self-paced, that is, the employees could start at any time and progress as they had time to complete the modules. The material covered was very well developed and provided strong insight and learning for employees. This client had spent a great deal of time and resources developing this program. To ensure that employees benefited from the in-house college this client incorporated development goals into their quarterly performance reviews. Each employee would identify an area they wanted to develop to discuss with their manager at each quarterly review and a plan would be put in place to support this development. If you are thinking this sounds like a great approach, not the typical error I have been pointing out, you are correct! Everything they had been doing up to this point was fantastic. It was a great approach to ensure ongoing conversations around development and providing consistent feedback. Where things started to go off the rails was that all development initiatives were tied directly to the courses within the in-house college, and ONLY the courses available within the in-house college. The information that employees were consuming was great information, the issue is they were only receiving formal learning. So why is this a problem? Let me illustrate this problem with something that happened to me recently.

I took a short day-trip last week to visit a site for a client I have a long-term relationship with. It was the first time in about a year I have had to accumulate travel related expenses for this client. To get reimbursed I have to log in to a proprietary system they use and submit the details of my trip before a payment gets made to me. Last year when they launched this system, I was required to complete a sixty minute training module to learn how to submit expenses correctly. At the time, I had my first travel expense available to input in the system in real time as I completed the training. Can you guess what happened this year? I had no idea how to submit my expenses correctly. It's been an entire year since I completed that training program, and it was like starting all over again brand new. I have worked on so many things in so many systems that the formal learning I completed last year was no help at all. The reality is, formal learning can be effective on its own, but it is best used as a precursor for experiential learning and social learning.

All of those employees in that construction company who had completed between four and ten courses in a year may never have had the opportunity to actually utilize the information and the skills that they had learned in a real-world situation. There was no hands-on application of that knowledge. There was also no social learning, where they would have been able to discuss the courses with a mentor or a coach. Unfortunately, the vast majority of what they learned through that coursework will have to be re-learned at a later date when they actually require that information in their current role or a new position.

Whenever I'm helping a client set up a development program I always emphasize trying to have a balance of all three types of learning. We want to make sure we have formal learning in place to help people understand new skills and competencies. However, we want to ensure that they have someone to share that learning with, to ask questions about what they've learned, and to learn from shared experiences. We should also focus a great deal of our efforts on creating experiential opportunities for employees to actually practice what they've learned. If we can create opportunities for hands-on learning in alignment with the 70/20/10 model, we are going to put our employees in the best position possible to succeed in their development.

The next major error that I see leaders making in the development of their teams is a focus on linear career progression. I know I said development is typically linear, but a career path doesn't have to be. When we think about career progression it's quite normal to think of promotions. You start as an entry level employee within your team, you're promoted to a mid-level employee, then into a senior role within the team, then you move into an entry-level leadership role, followed by a managerial role followed by a senior leadership role and so on. This type of linear progression through a department is something you've probably heard referred to as a career ladder. While there's nothing inherently wrong with progressing up a career ladder, it does not need to be our only option. There may be times where there is no immediate step in front of you. You may be ready, willing, and able to take that next step along that career ladder, but there is no opportunity.

What does a good leader do when this happens? They look towards a career lattice approach instead of a ladder. The best solution for this employee may be what was traditionally considered a lateral move. Lateral moves are often considered to be a negative or career limiting move by many individuals. It could potentially feel like you are being moved for the sake of change, and if your organization is primarily focused on a career ladder mentality a lateral move can make it feel like you are even further from the next advancement in your career.

Organizations with a strong development culture don’t look at career progression through the lens of the roles or titles their employees aspire to. Instead, they focus on the competencies required to be successful in roles across all levels of the organization. Once you understand what competencies are required to succeed in roles at all levels, then you can give employees opportunities to develop those competencies. This can often be accomplished when an employee moves into a role with a similar classification to their current role, but in an area of the business that will give them the opportunity to develop a new competency or skill that will benefit their career moving forward.

I was coaching a former student of mine named Laura to support her career growth. She was feeling stuck in her role and was considering looking for a role outside of her current organization. Laura had worked for her current company for close to six years and in that time she had moved from a HR Recruiter into an HR Business Partner role. She had been a Business Partner for three years or so and was feeling like she was ready to progress her career and take on more challenges. Unfortunately, at her organization there were only two manager roles within the HR department, and both roles had been filled by new leaders in the last couple of years. The leaders in those roles were well qualified and likely to be in the roles for a while. Laura was unsure what the best approach would be for her to move her career forward. I asked her if her company had a competency model in place. It turned out that not only did they have a well-developed competency model, they had incorporated it into many of their key HR processes.

She had access to her performance records that were primarily based on evaluating her performance against the desired competencies of the organization. We were able to take a close look at the competencies that she excelled at, as well as the areas that she could use some development and growth. We also took a look at the position profile for a few different manager roles within the organization, including the two HR manager roles. This allowed us to identify a few key areas for development that Laura could focus on to ensure that she would be as prepared as possible to succeed in not only an HR leadership role, but any leadership role within the organization.

One of the competencies that was present in all leadership roles was "Financial Acumen and Stewardship." This was an area that Laura did not have much experience or comfort with. In looking through the internal postings for her company Laura found a posting for an eighteen month temporary role as team lead in the payroll department. The payroll department worked closely with HR but reported up through the finance department of the organization. Laura had a strong understanding of all payroll policies and practices from her time as an HR Business Partner. This role represented a chance to move into a position where she could gain valuable exposure to the finance team and really start to develop her financial acumen in addition to gaining some experience at an entry level leadership role. Laura applied and was the successful candidate for the Payroll Team Lead Position. In taking this position she technically moved further from the roles she aspired to, at least from the perspective of an organization chart. In actuality, she was able to develop more of the competencies that her organization valued in its high performing leaders. This ultimately led to her being included in a fast-track leadership development program as part of the succession management program at her company. Prior to even reaching the end of her eighteen month contract she was identified as the best fit for a new manager position that was being created within the HR department to support classification and compensation.

This is an example of the benefits of changing your mindset to career lattice vs staying stuck thinking about a career ladder. It was only Laura's willingness to move laterally that led to her reaching the next level or her career progression. If she had simply stayed in her previous role, she may have never had that opportunity, or may have left the organization all together.

Let me tell you about an up and coming go getter, with endless potential, a personality that was impossible to ignore and a work ethic so strong it was only matched by his graciousness and humility. It's me, I am talking about myself again. I have another story about a leadership mistake I got to experience first-hand. This time it was regarding my career development.

I worked in the HR department for a small industrial manufacturing company early on in my career. A couple of months after I started it was time for their annual performance and development cycle to kick off. This meant that year end reviews were conducted, but I did not have a review of any kind with my leader because I was so new with the organization. This organization's process dictated that once the reviews were completed all employees were required to complete a goal setting form and submit them to their leader. The goal setting form had a requirement that all employees set five goals for the year. The first three goals were meant to be work related goals. These were focused on improving the work that you currently do. What projects, tasks, and supports were you going to be completing?

The fourth goal was meant to reflect team development. How are you going to support the growth and culture of your team? The final goal was a development focused goal. This one was specifically meant to support your personal growth and learning. While I didn't have a year-end review, due to my short tenure, I was asked to complete the goal setting form and submit it to my leader to help us track progress for the upcoming year. Overall, the process made all kinds of sense. It was consistent and it created a strong foundation for performance conversations throughout the year. There was only one fatal flaw.

Based on the overarching theme of this book, I bet you can guess what the issue was! This process only worked if you had educated and engaged leaders. Unfortunately for me, this was not the case. My leader did not fully engage in the process. The first time that we had an actual conversation about the goals I had set was six months after the annual review window, or eight full months after I had started. This was where all employees were meant to have a mid-year review. She pulled up the goal setting form on her laptop and asked me "So, which of these can we cross off?"

For the work-related goals her question wasn't ideal, but we had monthly one-on-one conversations and my leader was involved in the work I was doing, so she had a decent enough understanding of the progress I was making on the majority of the projects I had been tasked with. The real issue that appeared was the development goal I had set. I was looking to progress towards leadership roles in the future. To get there I had set some goals around both formal education courses that could support my learning as well as looking to gain a mentor in a leadership role within the organization. I found an external program that provided the type of learning I was looking for and this program was within the budget allocations of our staff development fund. I had my application prepared but I needed approval from my leader for funding and the time required to complete the program. I brought it up monthly at our one-on-one's but my leader would always push it to the next month because she wanted to focus on the task at hand as that was the biggest priority for our day-to-day work. As a result, I missed the application deadline for two different cohorts of the program. I also needed her sign-off to put my name forward as part of our internal mentoring program, which I was never able to get either. During my mid-year review we reached my development goal and she looked at me dead in the eyes and said, "Tell me about the progress you have made towards this goal." My first thought was "Are you f#*"ing kidding me???" I had been trying to get the ball rolling on my development for months and it had been falling on deaf ears.

This leadership mistake is all too common. Poor leaders just aren't present in the development process of their employees. They don't pay attention to the development goals of their employees, and they don't get involved in helping them achieve their goals. Development needs to be a shared process. A leader can't force an individual to develop. I have facilitated all kinds of sessions where I could tell people were only there because their leader made them. We always referred to them as prisoners. If we were lucky, they would just sit quietly and be disengaged, unfortunately many times they would be actively disengaged, which is a nice way to say they were shit disturbers. They were difficult to work with and they would be disruptive towards others. They would be looking to derail the whole session at every opportunity.

Ideally, leaders should be working with their direct reports to create a development plan and be present and supportive in the development process. The leaders can guide the plan to ensure that the training and development identified by their employees will have a positive impact in their current and future roles, but by having the employee drive the process we can avoid the presence of prisoners. The leader should always be asking the question at the start of the year “what are you going to need from me to make sure you can attain your development goals?” The answer to that question should be included in their own goal setting documentation. Goal setting is a two-way street, and we want to capture both sides in our goal setting process to ensure that all parties are effectively being held accountable for the commitments they make.

In wrapping up our exploration of leadership mistakes in the realm of development, it's evident that fostering growth among team members needs is a multifaceted challenge. Leaders can often stumble in creating meaningful development opportunities, succumbing to the pitfalls of linear thinking and an overreliance on formal education.

The fundamental error we've discussed in this chapter is the failure to generate career development opportunities for employees. Investing in professional growth is not just a strategic move; it's a critical aspect of effective leadership. Developing every team member, not just high potentials, is important. Elevating the performance floor for all employees contributes significantly to the team's overall culture.

Understanding the 70-20-10 learning model is crucial. The common pitfall lies in an overemphasis on formal learning. While cost-effective and efficient, formal education becomes truly effective when paired with experiential and social learning.

Another prevalent mistake to be weary of involves the linear approach to career progression. While development is generally a step-by-step process, leaders must be open to the concept of a career lattice rather than a rigid ladder. Encouraging lateral moves and focusing on competency development can often be more beneficial in the long run.

For better or worse I have experience that sheds light on the importance of engaged leadership in the development process. Leaders must actively participate, guide, and support employees in their growth journey. A collaborative approach, where leaders and employees co-create development plans, fosters accountability and avoids the presence of disengaged "prisoners."

In conclusion, great leaders aim not only to develop individual team members but also to cultivate a learning culture within their teams and organizations. By embracing diverse learning methods, encouraging experimentation, and celebrating both successes and failures, leaders can foster innovation and engagement, creating a thriving environment for continuous growth.

CHAPTER 6 - RECOGNITION

One thing that you may be starting to see is that leaders can’t just rest on their laurels. Even when they do things right, another mistake can be just around the corner. You may have done a great job assessing your talent, but OOPS, you didn't tell them that they were highly valued and showed great potential, so they left. Maybe that wasn’t where you slipped up, you did share with your high potentials how valuable they were, and you encouraged them to focus on development to help get them to the next level of their careers but OOPS, you were so focused on your deliverables and the pressures from your own leadership that you kept pushing development conversations down the road and these employees got tired of waiting for your support and left anyway. A leader’s work is never done. This takes us to our next area where many leaders struggle. Employee recognition.

Employee recognition is a crucial aspect of maintaining a positive work environment and fostering employee engagement. As an HR consultant with over twenty years of experience, I've seen firsthand the impact that recognition can have on an organization.

When done effectively, employee recognition refers to acknowledging and appreciating the efforts, achievements, and contributions of employees in the workplace. It can take various forms, including verbal praise, written commendations, awards, promotions, or even non-monetary incentives like extra time off or special privileges. Employee recognition can have a positive impact in many different ways.

The first positive impact of recognition is that it can boost morale and motivation. When we feel recognized for the hard work and dedication we demonstrate, it feels good, which leads to increased morale and motivation to keep it up. This leads to increased job satisfaction and a higher level of engagement in the work we do. This can also lead to increases in productivity and performance. Recognized employees tend to be more productive and perform at a higher level. They are more likely to go above and beyond their regular duties, leading to increased efficiency and effectiveness in the workplace.

Effective recognition can also improve retention and reduce turnover. Recognized employees are more likely to feel valued and appreciated, which in turn increases their loyalty to the organization. This leads to higher employee retention rates and reduces turnover costs. Remember in chapter 4, our leader who failed to recognize the efforts and potential in two key employees due to a fear that he would be playing favorites? Recognition was a clear area of development for him.

Recognition helps create a positive and supportive work culture. When employees see their colleagues being acknowledged for their contributions, it sets a precedent and encourages a culture of appreciation. This can directly lead to organizational success. A well-recognized workforce is more likely to be aligned with the company's goals and values. This alignment translates into better performance, innovation, and ultimately, organizational success.

Employee recognition is a powerful tool for driving organizational success. I've seen firsthand the positive impact it can have on employee morale, motivation, and overall performance. It's not just a nicety; it's a strategic imperative for any successful organization. As the renowned management guru Ken Blanchard once said, "The best way to predict the future is to create it." By recognizing and appreciating your employees, you're actively creating a brighter future for your organization.

I frequently find myself coaching leaders on how to better manage employee recognition. There are a few different ways that leaders can struggle with recognizing their team members. When it comes to recognition, we are going to mix things up a little. Instead of only focusing on mistakes that leaders make, we are going to start by looking at the most common mistake I see organizations make. This mistake by the organization makes recognition exponentially more difficult for their leaders.

Organizations often do a bad job of defining what recognition actually means. Many of you reading this may work for companies that have a "rewards and recognition" program. Who is responsible for running that program? Where does the ownership for recognition fall in your organization? In my experience it can be all over the place. I have seen it with HR, Organizational Development, Payroll, Benefits, and one client I worked with had recognition efforts being led by their occupational health and safety team. When the purpose of recognition is unclear, the effectiveness will be greatly reduced.

The most common form of recognition programs that I see are Milestones programs. Milestones programs may have another name at your company, such as long service awards, years of service awards, or tenure awards. The main purpose of a long service award program is to provide recognition for employees who are reaching significant milestones in their career related to the time spent in the organization. Often employees will receive recognition for every five years of service with an organization. Traditionally as an employee reached each level, they received a predetermined gift that was likely branded with the company's logo. There has been a shift to make this process more self-serve in nature. Employees are sent a link to an online store where they can choose the gift they want from a more diverse selection rather than everyone getting the same gift. Once or twice a year these companies will invite all milestone recipients to a gala dinner or a luncheon to celebrate their achievements.

I think far too many organizations rely on milestone awards as the main driver of recognition. It doesn't work. People aren't motivated by milestone awards. For the investment required there is no real return to be seen. I was working with a client on a redevelopment of their benefits program and the budget for their benefits included their spending on milestone awards and celebrations. While taking a deeper look at the numbers, they had only 81% of their staff actually pick up their milestones award the previous year. Almost 20% of the people didn't even care enough about the program to pick up their plaque and gift. Admittedly the plaques were pretty cheesy acrylic crystal awards, and the gift was a branded water bottle, neither of which were particularly desirable, but ideally, you still would like to see people come and pick them up.

They also had a gala dinner for those who had reached a milestone, and only 44% of those eligible to attend RSVP'd for the event. Far fewer actually showed. Each employee who accepted their award was asked if they were ok with their name being shared across the organization in a congratulatory email. Only 22% of those who accepted their award wanted to be recognized publicly. It was clear that this program was not an effective use of resources in this company. This same situation happens all the time. People are not wanting to celebrate tenure. It is not the priority that it once was.

Beyond simple milestone programs, there are many other ways that companies will try and recognize employees. They are typically broken into two categories, formal recognition and informal recognition.

Formal recognition refers to structured and planned programs or systems designed by an organization to acknowledge and reward employees for their achievements and contributions. Some common examples of formal recognition include employee of the month awards, certificates and plaques, thank you cards, and recognition bulletins. The aforementioned milestone awards would fall squarely at the center of this category. The reasons organizations will choose formal recognition strategies is because they are seen as structured and fair. Formal recognition programs are typically well-structured and follow predefined criteria, ensuring fairness. These programs are designed to increase employee motivation. Tangible rewards, such as bonuses or promotions, can serve as especially strong motivators for employees to perform at their best. These programs can even enhance an employer's brand, making the organization an attractive place to work.

Informal recognition is spontaneous and often unplanned acknowledgment of an individual's efforts or achievements, usually expressed on a day-to-day basis. The most common example of informal recognition would be verbal praise. Expressing appreciation through spoken words or a simple "thank you." Peer recognition that can include colleagues acknowledging each other's contributions in the workplace is another example of informal recognition. Spot awards that provide on-the-spot rewards or recognition for exceptional performance would also qualify. There are several benefits to informal recognition, starting with allowing for immediate acknowledgment and providing timely feedback for employees. Regular informal recognition can contribute to a positive work environment and boost employee morale. That in turn can encourage a culture of appreciation and gratitude within the organization. Informal recognition can strengthen team dynamics thanks to the involvement of peers acknowledging each other, fostering strong team bonds.

With an understanding of both formal and informal recognition it may start to be clear what leaders struggle with the most. They just don't do it. There is no recognition. Leaders often struggle to provide any recognition to their employees, let alone positive feedback. How many of you reading this have ever had a leader who was bad at or never even tried providing positive feedback? I know I have had a couple. The worst example I can think of is when I had a boss who never really had anything positive to say. I used to dread getting emails from her. I always knew it was because I had done something she wasn't happy with. It was never to thank me for the work I did or to commend me for my hard work, it was to point out what I did wrong. This type of leadership can lead to employees who feel undervalued and unappreciated. It can also lead to decreased motivation and productivity.

This mistake is so common in leaders because it's such an easy mistake to make. I know I have been guilty of it myself when I have led teams. I have had employees make a positive impact on my team and immediately thought to myself “I can’t wait to let them know what a great job they’ve done.” Then the phone rings or an email comes in and I get immersed in sorting out this new challenge or problem. In my career as a leader I have thought so many positive things, and thanked my team hundreds of times in my head, but unfortunately, I didn't always follow through and make sure that my team knew how much I appreciated them. On the flip side, when something went wrong, or they made an error that needed to be fixed, I would always bring it to their attention and look to get things rectified. I know I am not alone in that either. It is so common for us to focus more on the bad than the good. A complete lack of recognition is problematic, but it can feel even worse if a leader only focuses on the negatives that are taking place.

I was leading a team a few years back and we had been incredibly busy working through some very challenging situations and projects. We were all so overwhelmed that mistakes were happening and frustrations were rising. I realized that I was a big part of the problem. I hadn't been bringing forward anything positive during meetings with my team and was only ever discussing what wasn't working very well.

I decided to try and do a better job recognizing the positive work that my team had done. I went to the store and bought a little fish bowl. I also picked up a bag full of decorative blue glass stones and a bag of yellow stones. At our office, my whole team was located in the same hallway with my office at the front. Whenever a member of my team had to go to a meeting in a boardroom, or to the kitchen or washroom, they had to pass right by my office. I set up a small table right outside of my office and I placed the empty fishbowl along with jars containing the colored stones on the table in the hall. I asked that my team consider the work they were doing as they passed my office. I told them to take a blue stone and put it in the fishbowl anytime something positive happened in their workday. Something they were proud of, a positive result, or having completed a daunting task. I also told them to grab a yellow stone and put it in the bowl anytime they were feeling bad about something that happened. A conversation going the wrong way, discovering an error, or even just feeling overwhelmed.

At our weekly Wednesday morning meeting I would dump the fishbowl out on the table and sort the stones into two piles based on their colors. We did this same activity for over six months, and every single week there were more blue stones in the fishbowl than yellow. Oftentimes it was a significantly greater number of blue stones. Far more good things had happened than bad for my team on a weekly basis, but I was doing a terrible job recognizing my team's successes and celebrating their hard work. Our conversions and interactions had not been reflective of the fishbowl at all. Quite the opposite in fact. We were always in crisis mode, putting out fires and trying to keep our heads above water.

Once we had the fishbowl in our meetings things started to change. I would start the meeting by counting the stones and taking time to share why I had put yellow stones into the fishbowl. I would share my successes and recognize the things that my team had done that led to success and positivity. I would then go around the room and give my whole team a chance to share their successes and the things they were proud of. It would take less than 10 minutes for each meeting and the positive impact it had on my team was immeasurable. The challenging work was still there, the phone kept ringing, the emails kept rolling in, but we were so much stronger as a team. My team supported each other so much better, and they were able to effectively handle even the biggest challenges.

I have told this story numerous times over the years when trying to help clients improve their communication and culture on their teams. Each and every time I get weirdly emotional. Even as I type the details of the fishbowl activity I went through with that team I get that same tingly feeling. Anyone that knows me on a personal level could vouch that I don't tend to catch feelings all that often (I have been called a robot on more than one occasion). That activity was a real eye opener for me in my career. At the time I didn't realize how impactful that team would be on the rest of my career. It was one of the most challenging times I ever had to experience as a leader, but I have never been so proud of a group of people as I was, and still am, of that team. The culture and cadence we built as a team was unlike any I had before or since. Despite all moving on to other organizations over the years we often find ourselves back together for projects and looking to each other for advice. I have used what I learned with that team so many times since and cannot emphasize just how important and impactful positive peer-to-peer recognition can be.

I hope you are starting to see just how crucial feedback and recognition can be for strong and successful teams. One of the reasons I like informal feedback is how timely it can be delivered. When I coach leaders a common fault I see is that they make the mistake of not providing feedback in a timely manner to their team members. Delayed or infrequent feedback can hinder progress and prevent individuals from making necessary improvements.

I have worked with leaders who would have serious concerns about the performance of someone on their team and yet they would wait to say anything to their employees until their annual performance review, sometimes sitting on this information for months. This is not acceptable. An employee should never be surprised or caught entirely off guard at what is brought up at their performance review conversation.

Delayed feedback can cause many undesirable outcomes. The biggest problem is that most employees aren't making errors on purpose, and if they aren't provided feedback those errors are likely to continue or get worse. This happened to me many years ago. I was fresh out of university with my Bachelor of Management Degree, specializing in human resources and labor relations, and I took my first professional job as a personal banker. What can I say, they were hiring, and I had student loans to pay. Soon after starting I found myself in a role where I was working primarily with mortgage brokers helping clients complete all the closing documents required to finalize a mortgage. This was at a time before "e-signatures" were a thing, and it involved paperwork. Lots and lots and lots of paperwork. I would close two to three mortgages each day, all of which would require the creation of upwards of one hundred pages of documents with countless details and signatures. Once I had closed the mortgage I would have to send the signed papers to the back office for processing. After about three weeks in this role I was called into my branch manager's office. I walked in and on his desk he had a massive stack of files, all with a back office checklist and sign off cover sheet stapled to the front cover. He sat me down and told me that this wasn't going to be an easy conversation.

He was formally notifying me that I was being written up due to my poor performance. I was shocked! I mean I must have had the dumbest expression on my face when he told me. I sat and listened to him talk for twenty or thirty seconds before I realized I was breathing through my mouth, because it was wide open.

I thought I had been doing a great job and had learned a brand-new role in very short order and was operating at full capacity in this new role faster than anyone had expected. He went on to explain that in the last thirty days I had made errors on forty-four different mortgages that I had worked on. For those of you keeping score at home, this was essentially all the mortgages I had worked on. These errors caused additional work for the back office and even potential delays and challenges to clients looking to purchase a house. It was a terrible feeling, I had no idea I was struggling so badly in my role. I wish I had known, I could have asked for help. I could have improved and learned from my mistakes. Instead, I got blindsided by negative feedback and became immediately disengaged. My mind immediately went to thinking about why this was a bad career choice, and wishing I hadn't taken the first job that was presented to me. If you are wondering what my branch manager said next, I can't help you. I stopped listening. My brain was already thinking about how I was going to be fired from the first 'real job' I ever worked in.

The worst part about the whole process for me was that after I calmed myself down I sat with my department supervisor to go over the cover sheets that outlined the mistakes that were made on each file. In my opinion, I hadn't actually made forty-four mistakes. I had made 1 mistake forty-two times, and two small other ones. I kept making the same mistake over and over, because I didn't realize I was making a mistake in the first place. If I had been provided timely feedback about the work I was doing I would have been far better off.

This interaction left such a bad taste in my mouth that I started looking for a new job the very next day and made my way into a recruitment role shortly thereafter. In a sense, I wouldn't be here writing this book if it weren't for the lack of timely feedback from my leader all those years ago, so silver lining I guess!

Whenever I bring on a new coaching client who is looking to improve their leadership capacity, recognition is one of the first areas we look to make improvements. In comparison to most of the other topics I am discussing in this book, recognition is something that can be implemented almost immediately. That is often the goal when I am developing leaders, trying to create a phased change plan for improving as a leader. Having something like recognition available as a quick win is always a great place to start. Often it's as simple as making it a point to say thank you to at least two people a day for the work they are doing. It's that simple to start developing a culture of recognition. This can be the catalyst for further improvements and changes.

In closing this chapter on Recognition, it's evident that effective leadership demands continuous effort and a keen awareness of potential pitfalls. Employee Recognition is a critical aspect that can potentially make or break a team. It's a domain where many leaders falter, often due to broader organizational oversight.

Recognition, when wielded effectively, has profound impacts on morale, motivation, and overall performance. At its core, recognition involves acknowledging and appreciating employees for their efforts, achievements, and contributions. It is not merely a nicety; it's a strategic imperative for organizational success.

The potential benefits of recognition are far-reaching. It boosts morale and motivation, leading to increased job satisfaction and engagement. Recognized employees tend to be more productive, efficient, and aligned with organizational goals. Moreover, it contributes to improved retention rates, reducing turnover costs, and creating a positive work culture.

Yet, despite its significance, organizations often stumble in their recognition efforts. Many leaders find themselves bogged down by their daily challenges, and as a result they neglect to acknowledge their team's positive contributions.

This failure is easy to fall into, as leaders grapple with the demands of their roles. However, the impact can be profound. A lack of recognition can lead to undervalued and demotivated employees, resulting in decreased productivity.

In conclusion, recognition is not just a leadership virtue; it's a catalyst for organizational success. Leaders must rise above the common pitfalls, recognize the importance of both formal and informal recognition, and actively foster a culture of acknowledgment. As we move forward, let this chapter serve as a reminder that in the intricate dance of leadership, every step counts, especially those that celebrate the contributions of the team.

CHAPTER 7 - PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

The next area we are going to cover is closely related to recognition; performance management. While recognition is focused primarily on positive accolades for a job well done, performance management is the mechanism by which we measure an individual's performance in the first place. How do we know how well our employees are performing?

Performance management is a comprehensive and continuous process designed to identify, measure, manage, and develop an organization's workforce, with the ultimate goal of enhancing overall effectiveness. This multifaceted approach encompasses various components crucial for success.

Performance management is often a scary topic for many leaders. When they hear the term performance management their mind immediately goes to poor performers and discipline. The reality is that performance management is about understanding and quantifying how all of your employees are performing. Could this information lead to a need to discipline an employee whose performance is below expectations? Yes, that does occur, but it's not the primary purpose of performance management. A well-developed performance management program can answer so many questions that an organization might have. Who are our best performers? Who are our worst performers? Those are the low hanging fruit questions, but we can learn so much more. What competencies should be included in our competency model? What development opportunities are required?

What training programs would be beneficial? How should we be allocating bonuses and incentives? What recruitment sources are working the best? Which managers are most effective? And on and on. There is so much valuable information that can be gleaned from performance management data.

We will cover some common errors leaders make related to performance management, but first it is important to remember that performance management will only be as effective as the process being used. So, what is the performance management process?

Let's start at the beginning of the process. (Novel concept, I know.) Performance management programs should start with goal setting. Goals setting is a bit of a recurring theme throughout this book. Goal setting involves the establishment of clear and measurable objectives for individuals and teams. These goals are the benchmark against which we are going to measure performance. In chapter 5 we spent some time looking at goal setting in relation to development. The good news is those same goals are what we can use to start the performance management process. A basic framework for performance management can be as simple as setting goals and then evaluating whether your team members were successful in achieving the targets. Ideally these goals are SMART and your team members can clearly show how they are meeting the targets laid out.

The next step in the performance management process is conducting a performance appraisal. The performance appraisal entails formal evaluations conducted periodically to assess employee performance against established goals and expectations. This evaluation process may incorporate self-assessments, peer reviews, and manager evaluations. I could probably fill an entire book just discussing the different components of performance evaluations and the most effective way to ensure we maximize the time spent conducting performance evaluations, but there is one question that I get more frequently than any other. How often should we conduct evaluations?

There is no one size fits all solution. The most basic structure you will see is evaluations that take place once a year. An annual, year-end performance review is quite common. This is never my first recommendation, but sometimes a client will have nothing in place for performance management and they want to ease into the process, so we will start the program with an annual review. Ideally, I like to see more frequent reviews. The programs I have created in my career have ranged from one review a year to upwards of fifteen.

If fifteen reviews a year seems excessive, let me explain. This performance management program was for a client with a remote workforce that worked on two to three week rotations. They would be at a site for fourteen to twenty-one days straight, then they were off for a week, and potentially at a different site for their next rotation. If they were to use annual reviews, there was a possibility that their manager during the performance evaluation window may have only worked with them for two weeks out of the entire year. It wouldn't have been an effective way to evaluate their performance. So each rotation they would be evaluated on the same ten key factors. The day before they got on the bus to come home the site manager would sit down and have a five to ten minute conversation with each departing employee to go over their evaluation results for their time at that site. This process provided immediate and ongoing feedback for employees and a strong data set for the performance of all employees.

The most common options I try and get clients to adopt are quarterly reviews. Many companies choose annual reviews because they don't want to add much extra time to their leaders' already busy schedule, but once they adopt a quarterly review system, leaders actually find it takes less time and feels like less of a burden. For an annual review you are likely going to spend at least an hour with each employee. Often it's even longer. In addition, you have to prepare and try and reflect on the past twelve months for every employee on your team. This can be very time-consuming.

There is also the issue with the recency effect possibly bringing bias into your evaluation. It is natural for a leader to focus their review on the most recent work completed by an employee because it's fresh in their memory. An employee could have been a tremendous asset to the company for the bulk of the year but make one significant mistake close to the review time, and they end up with a poor review because of the recency effect. The opposite is also true. One shining moment late in the year can overshadow months of mediocrity.

Quarterly evaluations don't typically require much, if any, prep, as the work the employee is doing is still fresh in the leader's mind. It also allows for much quicker adjustments if the employee is not on track to meet their goals. The conversations don't need to be nearly as long, and in the end a leader will spend less time working on performance assessments by doing smaller ones more frequently. It becomes a way to quickly go over the progress made on the goals that were created and discussed. The goals can be adjusted and revisited every three months. If quarterly feels like too much then I push for every fourth month, or twice a year at a minimum. At the end of the day, we want to create a process that is manageable by leaders while still adding as much value as possible to the development of the individuals on their team.

Another important consideration is the conversations that go along with the assessments. A well-developed performance management process will include conversations at each interval where an assessment is completed. It's critical that the members of your team know where they stand from a performance standpoint. Furthermore, performance management should involve the identification of areas for improvement and the provision of opportunities for employees to enhance their skills and knowledge through training and development programs. We need to do more than just identify how they are doing; we want to bridge the gap to development. Simply telling someone they are doing great or struggling isn’t good enough. We need the conversation to move towards ‘so what does this mean’ to make sure there are actionable items that can be brought forward.

This leads to the final step of performance management, follow up. Creating opportunities and environments for your team members to achieve the goals they have developed is critical. The reason we want to have multiple conversations throughout the year is so that goals can remain realistic, and both you as the leader and they as your employees can make commitments about what will be done during that period and what is needed to achieve success.

The importance of performance management is underscored by its alignment with organizational goals, contributing to increased productivity and efficiency within the workforce. Promoting employee growth, engagement, and development can serve as a strategic tool for succession planning and compliance with legal requirements. Moreover, performance management fosters a culture of continuous improvement by establishing a feedback loop that allows for adjustments and enhancements to organizational processes and employee performance over time.

In alignment with previous chapters, the most obvious error I see leaders making is not managing performance at all. Similar to recognition, if we aren't delivering performance management at all, we are doing all employees and leaders a disservice. This can be an organizational issue. If there is no formal process in place, then we are hoping leaders will take it upon themselves to manage and track performance. This rarely works. At the same time, if the process is too complex then there may be low usage as well.

I worked with one client who had a performance management program in place. Leaders were asked to complete a sixteen page document for each employee on their team. That was sixteen pages before they added their comments, ratings, and objectives. It was way too much work and leaders were simply not doing it. Can you imagine having to complete that big of a document for each of the eight to ten people who report to you? It must have been a nightmare, and it is no wonder I was brought in to help them redevelop their performance management process.

Another area that performance management is similar to recognition is in the importance of timely feedback. Think back to the example I shared of my time working in banking. We never want performance reviews to be a massive shock to our team members. The performance management process, or lack thereof, that an organization has in place is a primary driver of the success or failure for leaders trying to manage performance on their team.

Even where there are programs and structures in place to help encourage performance management, some leaders can still struggle. I think the most impactful mistake a leader can make when managing performance is leading by fear. Leading by fear is a toxic leadership style that can have severe consequences. When leaders rule through intimidation and coercion, employees become demotivated and fearful. This fear-based approach stifles creativity and innovation, leading to a decline in productivity. An employee who is scared they might be fired if they make a mistake will usually focus on doing the things that they believe will help them keep their job. They will not take risks. They will not be creative or innovative. They will not feel safe asking questions or making objections. There will be no psychological safety on the team. There is nothing worse for team culture than a team full of employees that are scared they will lose their job at any moment. Team members will not support each other, they will not share ideas, and overall, the culture will be terrible, and no one will want to stay on your team.

I have had the displeasure of working for a leader who used fear as their primary performance management tactic. I was working at a recruitment and staffing agency early in my career and we had some fairly aggressive targets for our team. The first quarter of our year we were way under our targets for filling vacancies, and this leader made sure to let us know that we were not meeting their expectations. They started to really put pressure on all of us to improve the numbers. We were told “if you care about your jobs at all, you will not only start hitting your targets, but exceeding them. Those who don't care about their job won't work for me for long.”

This type of pressure continued. If you asked for a day off this leader would say “sure, if you don't care enough to be here, I guess you might as well take the day off.” My whole team was fearful that we would be fired and it really affected the culture and the way we worked. This leader likely thought that by scaring us he would bring us together and we would start to see an increase in productivity. In reality, the opposite happened. Everyone became very protective of their work. No one wanted to help someone else, because helping them could lead to you having low numbers and being fired. People were secretive of what they were working on, and many team members, myself included, lost clients because we weren't able to support them effectively. We were more concerned with hiring lots of people than we were about hiring good people. Clients didn't like the employees we would find, and they would drop us as their agency. In that fearful quarter, we did see an uptick in total hires for our team, but it still resulted in a net loss over the previous quarter because we lost so many existing customers.

Trying to scare people into performing better rarely works, especially not in the long run. People will prioritize activities that they think will save them from being fired, which can often be at the expense of others on the team or the best interests of the company. This typically creates a very poor work environment and working culture that people want to escape from.

In the same vein as using fear to manage performance is using humiliation. There are leaders who will make the mistake of publicly calling out the perceived poor performance of an employee in front of other team members in an attempt to make an example of them. These leaders think that this humiliation will lead to others working harder so the same thing won't happen to them. The same negative consequences will arise when using intimidation tactics as using fear-based tactics. People are going to hate working for you and leave.

The next error I see leaders make when managing performance is that they fail to include their employees in the performance process. This typically happens when a company has a performance management process in place, but it is seen by leaders at a checkbox activity. This is when all leaders are required to complete a performance assessment for everyone on their team. Where the issue arises is why they are required to complete the assessments.

I took over as the HR manager at a mid-sized construction company at one point in my career. The previous manager was being promoted and relocated to a new role. As part of my orientation, she very proudly explained that they had just completed their annual performance review cycle and had their best response rate ever, 96%. I congratulated her on her success and asked which of their programs were informed by the results of the annual performance reviews. She stood there with a confused look on her face. I naively continued asking questions. I asked what systems they had internally to track and manage the performance reviews. She just chuckled and pointed at a lateral filing cabinet located in the corner of my new office. “We keep them in there,” was all she said. I walked over, opened the drawer, and saw massive file folders stuffed to the brim, simply labeled 2010, 2009, 2008… The performance reviews were sorted by year only. They were not put into employees' individual personnel files. They were not even placed in alphabetical order. There were over four hundred two-page reviews for the previous year, in completely random order.

They were essentially useless to the organization. Just when I thought their performance review process couldn't be worse, I pulled one of the reviews out to have a look and was even further amazed at how bad things were. The form was completely one sided. The leader completed and signed off on the document with no involvement from the employee. It was like a report card from elementary school, except it never got sent home to their parents for review and acknowledgement. The leader could write whatever they wanted, there was no review, no conversation with the employee, no goal setting, no feedback, no sign off. You get the idea. The whole process was a waste of time, and paper for that matter. The most important part of performance related feedback is that the individual whose performance is being evaluated actually receives the feedback from their leader.

There needs to be employee involvement in the process. If the feedback is meant to have an impact, which is the whole flippin’ point in the first place, then we need to include them in the process. This can be as simple as forwarding a completed performance assessment to them once it's done. What is so much more effective is having a conversation with the employee to make sure they understand why this feedback is being given, what they need to do moving forwards, and what supports exist to help them reach their goals. Any time I have worked with a client to create or update their performance management program, I always take it a step (or two) further than just a form to fill out.

First and foremost, I ALWAYS include a conversation as part of any review. There needs to be the opportunity for an employee to ask questions and share their perspective of what has led to the perceived levels of their performance. Good or bad, we want to know their insights. The other piece I always include is an employee sign off section right alongside their leader's signature. I also like to include a checkbox right above their signature that offers them two options. The first option will state that "I accept the feedback provided within this document." The second option will state "I acknowledge that a performance review conversation has taken place regarding the information provided, however, I would like to dispute the accuracy of this feedback."

Essentially, what I am looking to do is provide an avenue for employees to dispute their performance review. Without that second option, the concern is an employee who may want to argue that the feedback provided is inaccurate has no way to do so. They do not get the chance to share their side of the story. Or, by sharing their side of the story, they could face retaliation. A leader could easily dismiss their objections and try to force them to sign it as is. Think back to our previous section about leading through fear. A leader telling their employee, "sign this or else…" is not what we want in a performance review.

Our goal as leaders should be agreement. Ideally the feedback we provide is accurate and the employee agrees that they are doing really well, or that they could stand to improve in some areas. This won't always be the case. Rather than having a heated, potentially confrontational conversation, we can have that second box on the form that allows the employee to escalate their concerns should they disagree with the feedback or rating that they have been provided. The process that I create will always ensure that anytime an employee checks the dispute box, we will open an HR investigation into their concerns, and we will always include them in that investigation process.

The initial reaction I get from clients is often one of concern. They are worried about the time and effort that will need to be spent on HR investigations. In practice, we rarely see many investigations at all. That second checkbox really acts as a "give a sh*t filter" for leaders. Leaders know that if they don't put in the effort to provide accurate, quality feedback the first time around, it will lead to more work in the long run. Almost every form that has come back requiring an investigation has been on the team of someone known to be a ~~shitty~~ sub-optimal leader in the organization. It is rarely a surprise to senior leaders who end up involved in the investigation.

In wrapping up the topic of performance management, it should be evident that effective leadership in this realm is critical for organizational success. Many leaders find performance management daunting, often associating it with addressing poor performance. However, the essence of performance management lies in understanding and quantifying the entire spectrum of employee performance. Beyond identifying best and worst performers, it provides valuable insights into competencies, development opportunities, training needs, bonus allocation, recruitment effectiveness, and managerial effectiveness.

The heart of performance management lies in the conversations that accompany assessments. A well-developed process includes discussions that go beyond merely stating how employees are doing. It involves identifying areas for improvement, providing opportunities for development, and bridging the gap between evaluation and actionable items.

Transitioning to the discussion of common errors you need to avoid, the most glaring mistake is the absence of performance management altogether. Timely feedback emerges as another crucial aspect, preventing performance reviews from becoming massive shocks to team members. Leaders must avoid using fear or humiliation as tactics, as these toxic approaches stifle creativity, innovation, and overall team culture. Lastly, be sure to avoid the exclusion of employees from the performance process. Merely completing assessments as a checkbox activity without involving employees renders the process ineffective. In contrast, including employees in the process through conversations, sign-offs, and dispute options creates a more meaningful and impactful performance management program.

CHAPTER 8 - DISCIPLINE

Let's take a moment and reflect on a couple of the common leadership errors we have already discussed. Those areas are performance and recognition. Let's assume you have been working your way through this book and trying to avoid the common mistakes we've discussed, and you have been working on developing some of the skills and techniques I have suggested. You are pleased with the progress you're making and are seeing improved results. For the most part your team is responding well to the changes in your leadership style.

First off, you're welcome! Haha! More importantly, it's critical that we discuss how all that great work you have done can be quickly derailed. Unfortunately, the reality of leadership is at some point you are going to have underperforming employees. You can be doing everything right, but that doesn't mean that all employees are going to perform at an acceptable level.

In this chapter we are going to take a close look at how leaders can struggle to manage employees when they are behaving poorly. The first, and by far most common mistake I see leaders make, is focusing far too much of their time and attention on the poor performers on their teams. It goes in line with the old adage that the squeaky wheel gets the grease. We often focus our attention on those who are not meeting expectations.

As a leader you have many expectations of your own. You have targets and goals to meet, you have budgets to manage, you have meetings to attend, strategy to develop, etc. There is often a finite and small amount of time spent dealing with and developing your team. This in and of itself is an issue, but if this precious time is spent primarily dealing with underperformers, then we are failing our teams.

I was hired to do some leadership coaching with an electrical equipment manufacturer. They had ten manager level leaders that I had the opportunity to work with. I started the process by having a one-on-one conversation with each manager to assess how they felt they were doing as a leader, what they felt their strengths were, and what challenges they were facing. Eight out of the ten managers brought up challenges they were having with underperforming employees. Some were minor issues, like tardiness and slightly increased absenteeism. Others were dealing with more substantial problems like continued, intentional subordination, bullying, and even potential time theft. With each of these leaders I asked them to tell me what they had done towards improving their troublesome employee's behaviors. I asked for details about what type of conversations they had been having, how long those conversations took, what type of preparation they needed to do prior to the conversation, how long that preparation took, who else they needed to consult, and so on.

They all had taken somewhat different approaches, but the one thing they had in common was they had spent what felt like a lot of their time trying to improve the situation. At this point in the conversation, I asked each of the managers about the rest of their teams. Specifically, I asked if they had any exceptional employees, ones that had really stood out over the last six months or so. They all had at least one individual on their team that they saw as a rockstar employee. I then asked them for details about what kind of conversations they had been having with these top performing employees, how long these conversations took, what type of preparation they needed to do prior to the conversations, how long that preparation took, who else they needed to consult, and so on. Sound familiar? It was the same line of questioning that I asked regarding their underperforming employees, but the responses I got were much different. To be honest, from several leaders I got no immediate response at all. Lots of blank stares, lots of "ummmms" and "ughhhhhs." It was quite clear that time was not being spent on their high performers. Focusing more on their high performers was where we would start our coaching relationship.

This is similar to what we have discussed previously related to recognition. We don't want to forget to spend time on those who are doing great things for our team. I am not saying you want to end up in this situation, but if someone who reports to you decides to leave because they feel as though they aren't getting the attention they need, would you rather it be a top performing employee or one with performance shortcomings? It is far more detrimental to our team to have a great employee leave than it is if a bad employee decided to move on. We see it in exit interviews all the time when we ask folks why they are leaving. “I don't feel valued by my leader/organization,” is one of the most common responses. This is especially problematic if the reason their manager is too busy dealing with the underperformers on the team to engage and develop the high performers.

Think of it this way. If you are a manager, what's going to be more beneficial to your team, raising the performance and capability ceiling of your team, or raising the performance floor? To put that another way, do you think it is better to focus on moving members of your team from good performers to great performers, or moving members of your team from bad performers to average performers. I would recommend you focus on the good, support them, put your time and energy into them, and see how high they can go. If anyone is going to leave my team because they don’t feel valued, I would much prefer it be those employees who are not performing at the expected level.

I am not advocating that you ignore or give the cold shoulder to your team members who are struggling. I don't want to encourage any behavior by leaders that could be deemed constructive dismissal. All employees deserve an opportunity to reform and improve in their role. I simply think it's most important that your top performers know they are supported and valued. If you feel secure in this then you absolutely need to start developing the rest of your team. There may be situations where your focus will need to be on an underperforming employee first. Typically, this will be the case when an employee is doing more than just underperforming, they are actually causing significant damage to the operations of your team or to other team members. When situations like this arise, it is critical that these behaviors be addressed immediately. There need to be clear expectations laid out and accountability for not demonstrating expected behavior. What you don’t want to do is to spend all your time monitoring this employee, working with them constantly looking to see incremental improvements. If there needs to be action, take quick action and refocus on the rest of your team.

It's at this point that you may be wondering, “how do I know when immediate action is needed?” I often recommend that the first thing you need to determine is if you think the issue is a product of aptitude or a product of attitude. If the problem stems from a lack of understanding or knowledge, then it's fair to say that aptitude is the issue. If the performance issues stem from an individual who likely knows better but is choosing to behave poorly, then we are likely looking at an attitude problem.

When we are faced with an aptitude issue, there are often many positive outcomes and solutions we can consider. It really comes down to development. This is where we can have some strong conversations one-on-one and look at what this employee needs to gain the understanding they are lacking. Sometimes it can be as simple as informing them about a change in process or new way of doing something. Oftentimes these issues can be rectified quickly, as they are mostly driven by a lack of knowledge. As a leader you need to facilitate the learning process for this individual. When done effectively, these types of performance issues are often resolved quite quickly with very low levels of recidivism. Most likely there is no discipline necessary (more on that in a minute). It is important to point out that as a leader you need some self-awareness here as well. It's not solely on the individual to own their development. You have a role to play and you need to ensure that the roadblocks that have stymied their understanding are not a result of your actions. As you will recall from Chapter 5, development needs to be a shared responsibility.

When attitude is the driving force behind performance issues there likely needs to be a different approach to managing the situation. When individuals with a poor attitude are having performance issues, it is typically something that carries intention with it. They likely know that what they are doing is wrong, they just don't care. When this is the case, development is not the solution. In all likelihood this is where we look at discipline. Discipline can be extremely tricky in many situations, especially if there isn't any type of structure or model in place.

When there is no structure in place, we tend to see inconsistent and ineffective discipline taking place. I took a job years ago as an HR manager at an industrial manufacturing facility. A few weeks into my tenure at this company I had a shop Team Lead in my office who had an issue with one of her employees. She advised me that she wanted to discipline this employee because they were not doing an effective job with quality management. The employee was filling out quality inspection forms in advance without actually inspecting units. They were simply slapping the completed quality stickers on units as they rolled off the line without conducting proper inspections.

My first question was to determine if it was an attitude or aptitude issue. She informed me that she had spoken to the employee to ask why there had been so many quality issues. The employee informed her that the team was good at their jobs and the quality inspections were overkill and not an effective use of time. It was clear that we were dealing with an attitude issue, the employee felt that they knew better, and they were actively choosing to disregard policy and best practice. The decision to move to a disciplinary action seemed like the right approach. This organization did not have a formal discipline model in place at that time. They typically relied on a conversation between the leader and the HR manager to determine the right disciplinary approach for each situation. My next question for this Team Lead was related to similar incidents. I asked her if there had been similar infractions in the past that she was aware of. It turns out this was a fairly regular occurrence. There had been four similar incidents in different lines within the facility over the last six months. I asked her if she knew the disciplinary actions that were taken for each of the previous incidents. She had no idea, as it was all different team leads who had been involved in the process.

Unfortunately, this organization was still very manual in their processes and did not have any digital copies of tracking for performance management documentations. To get that information I had to talk to all the team leads and figure out who was involved so I could pull the appropriate employee files and find copies of the disciplinary actions. This may not sound too onerous, but this organization was a 24/7 manufacturing facility so there was a need to speak with night and weekend shift team leads. Once I had tracked down all the correct files, I found all kinds of interesting information. First off, there was no consistency in the documentation. The structure, content, and language was so different for each incident, even though the situations were all virtually the same. Some files had signed copies of everything, and others had unsigned documents that were retained in the file.

The next, and most alarming, issue was regarding the level of discipline that had been handed out. For one employee there was a handwritten post-it-note stating that the Team Lead had spoken to the employee about not completing quality inspections and informed them that they needed to improve their behavior. There was no sign off, there was no evidence of any kind that the employee was actually aware of the issue. There wasn't even a date listed about when the post-it was written. At the other end of the spectrum, there was one employee who had been skipping quality inspections who was given a three-day suspension, without pay, and in the letter they were presented there was language that included the statement “any further performance issues will result in the termination of your employment.” That letter was signed off by HR, the Team Lead, and the employee. Going from what could maybe be considered a verbal warning to an unpaid suspension with threat of termination showed complete lack of consistency in their disciplinary processes.

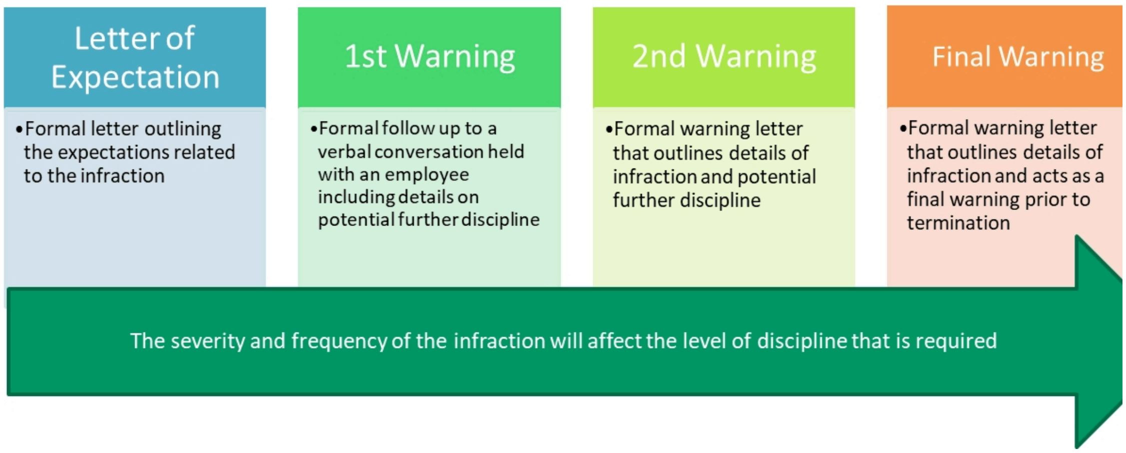
Consistency and process really matter when it comes to employee discipline. One common principle that many great leaders will use is called the “hot stove rule.” This idea was first coined by Douglas McGregor, an MIT business professor, way back in the 1960s. Essentially, the hot stove rule draws parallels between discipline and the feeling and reactions of touching a hot stove. The first important thing to note is that adequate warning is required. Employees need to be informed of the expected behaviors in the workplace. This can be done through code of conduct documentation or other means of ensuring that your team knows what is expected. This is the step where you explain to someone that stoves get really hot and can burn you if you touch them.

Much like a hot stove, effective disciplinary actions should provide immediate feedback. You know you made a mistake by touching the stove as soon as you touch it. We want a similar response for discipline. If we simply document the mistake so we can bring it to the employees’ attention at next month's performance conversation, it will be too late. They may continue to make that same mistake, or it could even escalate further. It is in everyone’s best interest to have the issue addressed immediately.

The hot stove principle also states that discipline requires impersonality. The actions taken are consistent based on the act that was committed, regardless of who committed the act. A hot stove does not bias who it burns, it can’t burn senior leaders or friends less severely. All who touch the stove will receive the same level of discipline.

Finally, touching a hot stove will result in a burn every time. It is consistent. Discipline must stay consistent to be effective. Disciplinary actions should not be ignored or skipped now and then. They need to be consistent to ensure that everyone in the organization is aware of the consequences of their actions.

To ensure that employee discipline is managed effectively I always recommend that clients implement a structured model that outlines all possible actions that may be taken related to discipline. The diagram below outlines a basic starting point that I will often use.



The most common question I get asked about discipline models is "how many chances should an employee get before they are terminated?" Unfortunately, there is not one size fits all approach. It can vary depending on many factors, starting with which types of infractions are included in the model. Some organizations will have a separate process for occupational health and safety related violations or attendance and punctuality. I prefer to have only one model for all things discipline, so my preference is to build a model that allows for adequate and appropriate actions for the situation at hand regardless of type of incident. There may not be a need for four or more steps if the list of infractions is significantly smaller.

The first thing that people may notice when they look at my template for discipline is that there is no place for a "verbal warning." I cannot even begin to count the number of leaders who have come into my office over the years and wanted to suspend or even terminate an employee. They would tell me about how many chances this individual has been given and how many verbal warnings they were given regarding their unacceptable behavior. If there is only one thing you take away from this book, let it be this… a verbal warning is NOT. A. DISCIPLINARY. ACTION! Say it with me one more time for good measure. A verbal warning is not a disciplinary action! The issue with verbal warnings is that, for the most part, they are unenforceable. There are rarely any witnesses to the conversation, as most leaders don't want to provide negative feedback to an employee in front of others. They pull the person aside and tell them that there needs to be improvement or more significant discipline may be required.

At the end of the day, it's almost impossible to enforce what was said in these conversations as they are, by nature, ‘he said she said’ situations. Managers never enjoy hearing this. The worst reaction that I have ever experienced from a leader was related to verbal warnings. They came to my office looking to fire an employee that they felt had been insubordinate and was refusing to do the tasks assigned to them. They outlined the myriad of issues they had spoken to this employee about. It had gotten to the point that this employee was openly mocking the leader right to his face when he would be asked to complete tasks.

This leader had a feeling that he would be asked for documentation of all the warnings, so he brought his notebook with him. In his notebook he had documented all the dates and times that he spoke to this employee. For each incident he had details on the topics of conversation and his notes on how the conversation went. I informed him that while I appreciated the effort he had made, unfortunately, those notes were not actionable as there was no way for us to prove that the conversations had taken place as he described. It wasn’t that I didn’t believe this manager. Everything they were saying was likely true and their frustrations were probably warranted. That being said, his notebook was not sufficient documentation of these issues, and that would be the first thing pointed out by a lawyer in a wrongful termination case should we fire this employee for cause.

This manager was not happy. What followed was a four or five minute rant by this leader, yelling at me for making his life so difficult. He kept tearing page after page out of his notebook, one at a time while crumpling them up and throwing them in my general direction while loudly lamenting all the reasons why I was wrong and the whole process was flawed. I was caught by surprise to say the very least. I went from shocked initially, to mildly amused by this leader's antics as he continued, but it's fair to say that my sense of humor may not be shared by all who find themselves in that situation.

As he calmed down, he took a seat, a couple of big, long breaths and began to apologize to me for the way he reacted. As we spent the next several minutes collecting the balled-up notebook pages scattered about my office, I told him that I understood why he was upset, and tried to reinforce the need to connect with HR much sooner when employees are behaving in insubordinate ways. I guess I lied before, if there is one thing I want you to take away from this chapter it is the three most important things we can do when it comes to managing discipline are document, document, and document. Proper documentation has saved my butt so many times in my career.

I know that in the real world a leader won't always have the foresight to get a formal warning letter drafted and in place prior to speaking with an employee. In fact, in practice there will be times where verbal warnings are required. Unacceptable actions and behaviors will be observed that require immediate attention by a leader. That is why if you glance back up to the model you will see that one action to be taken may be a first warning as a follow up to one of these necessary verbal warnings. The document that would follow would outline the details of the situation and would provide each party with the opportunity to acknowledge the conversation took place and provide the part they played. It also allows the employee to challenge the reprimand at that point. Essentially this letter would serve as formal documentation for the situation.

Many leaders may choose more of a coach approach, and work with a struggling employee to help them improve and work through these situations together. That is a wonderful approach to take, and one I encourage many leaders I work with to try. However, there is the risk that this coaching won't lead to improvements, so I make sure they are aware that if that is the case they will be starting back at the beginning of the disciplinary process. If you think you can coach a struggling employee and help them turn things around, that should be your first option. Just ensure you have the time and energy to dedicate to this endeavor. If you are concerned that there may be no coaching that could help this individual out, it's time to start looking to your discipline model.

Speaking of the start of the disciplinary process, the first category of letter that you see is a “letter of expectations.” This option is best in situations where an employee has demonstrated poor behavior, but there is a concern that perhaps more could have been done to ensure that they were aware that their behaviors were unacceptable. It’s a classic case of “should have known better.”

This may be where we turn to those aptitude issues we covered at the start of the chapter.

In HR investigations we often talk about the reasonable person test. This is where we ask ourselves if a reasonable, average employee should know whether something is right or wrong. If we feel a reasonable person would know better than to do this action, we likely would move to more severe disciplinary actions because they should have known better than to demonstrate these actions.

If the opposite is true, then we may want to consider using a letter of expectation to clarify that these behaviors are not acceptable. The classic example is not showing up for work. Let's pretend an employee doesn't show up for work one day. They didn't call in sick, they didn’t contact anyone in the organization to let them know they wouldn't be coming in. What is the appropriate response? Should we draft a letter of expectation that outlines in detail why no-showing for a shift without any communication is a problem? I would argue no, this isn't necessary. If we apply the reasonable person test, and pretend we grabbed any random employee then asked them if this behavior was acceptable, ten out of ten of them would say, no, this isn't acceptable. It is completely fair for an employer to expect their employees to notify them if they won't be coming in. Could there be extenuating circumstances, like injury, or accidents that prevented them from coming in? Of course, that is why all disciplinary documents need to be acknowledged by the employee and their supervisor. Once they have shared their side of the story, a decision can be made about whether there is a need to proceed.

On the other hand, for some situations a letter of expectations may be just the right level of formality. Years ago, I was working at a tech manufacturing company that built highly specialized electrical components for mining operations. We had our receptionist quit with basically no notice one day in mid-December. Our executive team decided we would wait until January to replace the position because it was going to be pretty quiet over the holidays and some of the individuals involved in the recruitment process were going to be away until then. They asked the administrative pool of employees to help cover the reception desk for two to four weeks while we found someone new.

The admin group set up a schedule and they all rotated through the reception area to cover that role. They were provided a process manual and advised to reach out to the receptionist at our sister office in another city if they had any questions. One day a couple weeks into this temporary arrangement, a client sent a courier to pick up a rush order of components they required. The employee that was covering reception went to the back, grabbed the packages for the courier, got a quick signature, and sent him on his way. Unfortunately, this employee did not check to see if the client who ordered the components was set up as a direct bill vendor in our system. They were not. That means that the parts should not have been released without payment being received. The courier was supposed to drop off a cheque at the time of pick up. However, when he wasn't asked for payment, he chose to say nothing, keep the cheque, take the components, and never deliver them to the client. It was a $40,000 dollar order that was now unaccounted for. Our client had used a small hot shot courier service and was not able to track the individual down for some time. All we had was an illegible signature on a packing list, which was no help. The client wasn't going to pay us as they never received their parts, and this courier was long gone with 40k in our product.

The manager of the administration group came to me with this situation and wanted to write this employee up for failing to refer to the process manual which did include instructions around verifying payment methods prior to handing over any products to clients. I pushed back because I felt that this was a little too severe. The reality was that the process manual was an eighty page document that was not well indexed or easy to use. This employee was simply covering the desk for half a day every other week while still trying to keep up with their regular duties as best they could. Could they have asked the courier to wait while they searched for the process to follow, could they have called the other office to ask what the process was? Yes, on both accounts, but would you have done that? If you were in her situation and a courier came in to pick up a rush order, would you have done anything differently than she did? She got the package for the courier and had them sign for the pick-up.

At the time she believed this was the right thing to do. I understand the leader's desire to document this infraction, as she did make a mistake, and that mistake did cost the company a significant amount of money, but I persuaded him to utilize a letter of expectation rather than a formal warning. The letter of expectation outlined that while we understand there were extenuating circumstances that led to this unfortunate situation, it is important to take the time to consider all options and ask for support when faced with unfamiliar situations. In the end, a letter of expectation is a way to acknowledge that a mistake was made, but perhaps the reason it was made was that the expectations of the employee were not clearly defined or understood.

Once we have determined that the situation does not call for a letter of expectation then we need to consider the other options that are available to us. This is where the attitude piece tends to fall. In the previous model, disciplinary measures include first warning, second warning, and final warning. As the names suggest, this is a progressive process. However, that doesn't mean that employees have three strikes for each type of infraction. This is a common mistake I see organizations making when they develop a discipline model. Essentially, if you have an employee who has attendance issues you may give them three warnings before you terminate them. During that time, they are producing very low-quality work, so once again they get a first, second and final warning about the poor quality of their work. Turns out they are also consistently being insubordinate towards their supervisor, so they are given three more warning letters and so on. I think it's clear why a model like that is ineffective. If an employee needs to be written up six, nine, even twelve times, clearly they are a serious issue. They are likely disruptive and will have a major negative impact on your other employees. That is why in the model above there is a big green arrow that mentions the need to consider two important factors, frequency and severity.

Frequency refers to how many times has this individual been written up. The important consideration here is that it doesn't necessarily matter what they were written up for previously, simply that there is a pattern of undesirable behavior. With each new issue they would progress through the model from a first, to second to final warning. With each warning letter there would be clear direction around what will be the consequences if there are any further issues of any kind, not just infractions of a similar nature.

The second major consideration with a disciplinary action is severity. Not all disciplinary actions are created equal. Should two employees receive the same level of warning if one has been having issues showing up to work on time and the other physically shoved a colleague who disagreed with them? Of course not, the severity of what was done needs to play a factor. Combined with frequency the attendance issues could lead to a severe response, but not on its own. The physical altercation on the other hand would likely require a final warning at a minimum depending on internal policies.

It's important to remember that the discipline model is designed with actions meant for employees who are remaining with the organization, and while the warnings that are delivered may be revisited for the purpose of termination at a future date, there should always remain the hope that an employee reforms and the negative behaviors become a thing of the past. With that in mind I will often set a timeframe for different types of infractions that occur. If you receive a 1st warning for low quality work, then have no concerns for more than a year before another issue arises, perhaps there is no need to progress to a higher level of discipline. I want to once again mention the importance of documentation. In addition to documenting and getting sign off for each disciplinary letter, it is critical that organizations track their disciplinary actions.

This is a huge mistake that is shared by leaders and HR. The completed documents from an incident are placed in the employees file, but there is no means of central tracking. There is no system that can be referred to in order to find past incidents. There is a reliance on the individual leaders and HR to remember past incidents. Typically, I will provide a client a spreadsheet template that they can use to track each incident, type of infraction, and disciplinary action taken. This is how we can ensure we are not letting bias creep in with our decision making about the severity of the infraction.

For clients who really want structure in the process, I have even created a points system based on which level of discipline was delivered. For example, a letter of expectation was worth 1 point, the first warning was worth 2 points, the second warning was worth 3 points, and final warning was worth 5. Then we would set a number, such as 6 or 7 total points, as the trigger to move towards a for cause termination.

If the situation brought forward by a leader calls for termination, for example violence, or theft, then it is a different story. We are not trying to keep this employee, so we would move straight to our termination process.

I have worked with leaders who struggle with discipline even when organizations have a strong performance management structure in place. One of the major issues I have seen is leaders who have a difficult time controlling their feelings and emotions. Certainly, the first thing that may spring to mind is a frustrated leader lashing out and yelling at an employee who is underperforming. This certainly does happen all the time. If you find yourself yelling anything other than “HEADS UP " or “LOOK OUT” at one of your employees, then you've likely just made a mistake. As the old saying goes, "two wrongs don't make a right,” and an employee's poor performance is not justification for leaders lashing out. I understand that not everyone can be a robot and hide their frustrations. It's not healthy to keep that emotion all bottled up inside either. As a leader you need to find a different avenue to relieve that stress and frustration. As much as it wasn’t ideal that the leaders I told you about earlier decided to take their frustrations out on me, their HR support, it was a far better outcome for them than had they yelled and screamed at their employee. I have worked with organizations that have avenues set up such as mentoring programs, peer support groups, or leadership communities of practices. These can be a good place to go and vent frustrations with likeminded people in your organization.

The tip I give all leaders I work with is to recognize when you need to vent and find a safe avenue to do so. But, as soon as you're done venting, stop and ask yourself the question “so what am I going to do about this?” If you don't ever move towards action with the situation causing you this much grief, you will be stuck in this negative cycle.

While frustration and anger are the first emotions that we think of that a leader may struggle with controlling, they are not alone. Sometimes ‘positive’ emotions can be equally detrimental. I once worked for a leader who was too nice. He was too caring and too considerate of everyone he worked with. I know that statements like that only further the notion that I am an emotionless robot, but hear me out. I have shared some stories about connections I have made and teams I have loved being a part of. I care deeply about all of those individuals and want nothing but the best for each one of them. But to go all the way back chapter one, leaders have to lead. Leadership is tough. It requires making difficult decisions that can dramatically impact the lives of those around you, even if you like them.

My leader who I described as ‘too nice’ really struggled with making tough decisions. He tried so hard to keep everyone happy all of the time. That just isn't realistic. He dreaded giving any negative feedback to anyone and avoided it at all costs. He constantly praised everyone for their exceptional effort and high quality of work. You may think this should be a good thing, we covered the importance of recognition in chapter 6. There are issues with this approach. I can tell you firsthand that this praise very quickly became meaningless. Why? Because as much as we may want to think that the work we do is exceptional, we have all been guilty of phoning it in once in a while. There were some projects I sent his way that I was not all that proud of, that I had rushed through because of competing priorities or even just because I wasn't engaged in that particular project. I received the exact same level of gratitude and recognition for my ‘hard work’ on those projects as I would on projects that I actually did bust my ass on. It got to the point where the praise or acknowledgement started to become meaningless to me and others on the team. Were we good at our jobs? Sure, but not that good, not all the time. There is an old saying, if everything is special, then nothing is special. That was how things felt on that team.

The overt positivity from this leader was challenging for those of us who were traditionally good performers. It was even worse when you consider the team members that struggled. This leader couldn't bring himself to be negative or potentially hurt an employee's feelings, and he ended up burning himself out trying to pick up the slack from the poor performers. He didn't want anyone to feel let down and ended up damaging his own role and reputation.

As we close the pages of Chapter 8, I want to commend you for making it this far. We made it! From minor concerns like tardiness to more serious problems like intentional subordination, at some point in your leadership journey you're going to find yourself investing significant time trying to manage discipline.

Remember, a verbal warning is not a disciplinary action. The lack of enforceability and potential pitfalls make it insufficient. Document, document, document, your HR team will thank you later.

Don't be afraid to take action. Don't be afraid to make difficult decisions. And don't be afraid to have difficult conversations. Structure and consistency are your friends in disciplinary matters.

CONCLUSION

I can't thank you enough for taking the time to make your way through this book. There are whole host of reasons you may have decided to read this book. Maybe you're a leader who’s come across some challenging situations, maybe you’re just getting ready to start out as a leader and you're trying to put yourself in a position to succeed, or most likely, you’re a family member or friend of mine who I gave a copy to, so you skimmed through it one day when your Internet was out.

Regardless of your reason, I think you've made a great decision. Not just because I think the topic covered in this book can genuinely help you in your career, but also because what you are doing is showing curiosity and a desire to learn and grow. This is a commendable trait. It's something I look for in high potential individuals when doing succession management. I think it's a great goal to be a lifelong learner. I know personally, I'm never done learning. Even with all my experience I haven't seen and done it all, not even close. Even when I think I've seen every wacky or unique situation my phone will ring and I'll get blindsided with a new question or opportunity.

Since the time I started writing this book I've experienced something brand new. I had a former client reach out with a disciplinary question. I've worked in a bunch of different industries and it's typically tough to catch me off guard with a scenario or incident that you are dealing with. When people say, “you'll never believe what this person at my office did last week,” I am rarely surprised. I usually have a similar situation or two that I have dealt with in the past, but this one was new to me.

This client had acquired a small competitor and expanded and renovated their offices to accommodate the new employees. As part of the renovation, they converted a couple of offices into an expanded mechanical room and janitorial supply storage area. It was close to the back door of the building and had easy access to the loading area for supplies and maintenance. This change necessitated moving some employees around to new offices. One manager who was moved to the other end of the building was not happy with being moved. Apparently, he was telling anyone who would listen that he was upset. His parking spot was out the back of the building and the location of his old office was great for him as he could use the back door and be in his car in no time. Now that door was no longer accessible and he had to walk all the way around the building to the front door to go from his parking spot to his office.

So far, it's not that unusual of a situation. Where it gets interesting is after about two weeks of these changes being implemented the custodial staff brought a complaint forward. For four straight days when they had gone into this displaced manager’s office at night to clean and dump the garbage, they found a garbage can that was half full of liquid. That liquid was urine. The manager was so upset that the maintenance and custodial staff had taken over his workspace he started peeing in his garbage can to get back at them. My contact at the company then went on to explain that they terminated this manager with cause due to his behavior. He then turned around and filed a wrongful termination suit against them claiming that he was discriminated against and fired due to health reasons. His claim that the location they put him in was too far from the bathroom and due to a previously undisclosed kidney issue, he had no choice but to relieve himself in the garbage can.

See what I mean! Something new can come at you anytime. If you're wondering what the outcome was with the angry whizzer, I don’t know yet. I’m still working with the client on the situation. With any luck enough people enjoy this book, and I will get the opportunity to write a follow up. I will make sure I catch everyone up on how this interesting situation turned out and likely I will have more wild and interesting stories to share.

Thanks again for your time, and I wish you the best of luck in your leadership journey.

Tyler