

UpFront: Leadership Reminders - Creating a Circle of Safety for Your Team Amidst Workforce Challenges

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Family members take care of each other, from birth to old age and at every stage in between. We often create “circles of safety” for our family members (whether that’s parents, children, spouses, or siblings) and stand up for them even when they’re not in the room.

As Charles Duhigg explains in *Smarter Faster Better*, his book about productivity, the concept of family members caring for one another extends beyond family dynamics and applies to the relationships between leaders and employees. When employees enter our organizations, they entrust us with their well-being, which makes them invaluable assets. As leaders, we must be willing to advocate for our employees, even when they are not present.

In a time when occupational burnout is rampant and our workforce is traumatized, it’s imperative for leaders to cultivate a circle of psychological safety. Team norms should foster an environment where employees feel comfortable taking risks, addressing conflicts openly, building trust, empathizing with one another, expressing enthusiasm for their ideas, and fostering diverse opinions without fear of repercussions. After all, your team’s norms and values will become an embodiment of your organizational culture.

Humans naturally desire a sense of control—even babies express this desire by occasionally resisting the activities they need, like sleep. Effective leaders should create an atmosphere that empowers employees to take the driver’s seat, signaling support and trust for them. Developing an internal locus of control can enhance staff morale, motivation, and retention.

Amid workforce shortages and increased stress, I look to Rory Vaden, a “self-discipline strategist, for his “focus funnel” time management model to help with work management. First:

- Give yourself permission to eliminate elements that do not add value, such as projects, meetings, and services.
- Delegate whenever possible and where it makes sense. For instance, at Reedsburg Area Medical Center, we regularly enlist retired nurses to assist with our fall immunization efforts, diffusing stress on our retail pharmacy staff.
- Use automation to gain efficiencies.

When elimination, delegation, or automation is not possible, work must pass through the focus funnel. As a task filters through, assess whether staff should handle it immediately or later. Prioritize “now” tasks and intentionally postpone “later” tasks. Intentionally procrastinated work re-enters the focus funnel along with new tasks, repeating the same process. Don’t be surprised if some of the intentionally procrastinated work resolves itself.

When we bring new employees on board, they don’t arrive with the expectation of being managed; they expect to be led. Effective leadership requires a clear vision, a well-thought-out strategy, and the technical expertise necessary to guide your team. As a caution, never ask an employee to do something you wouldn’t do yourself. Keep your ear to the ground and refrain from “managing in abstraction.”

Be a mentor by investing time in understanding your team’s strengths and

weaknesses. Use this knowledge to offer tailored support that helps team members reach their full potential. Empower your team to unlock the innovator within, enabling them to function like a well-oiled machine even in your absence.

Demonstrate a genuine interest in your employees’ success and well-being. Invest time in getting to know your employees and their families beyond the workplace—nurture and strengthen these relationships.

Recognize that career development for employees is vital for professional growth and engagement. Investing in employees today will yield benefits for the organization in the future by reducing turnover.

Being results-oriented is crucial. As the late management consultant Peter Drucker reminds us, not everything that is measured needs to be improved. By measuring the right metrics and understanding the value of data, you can make informed decisions.

Finally, embody the traits of a good leader: maintain a passion for your work, be an attentive listener, consistently share information in a timely manner, and foster open and honest communication.

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