

intelligence vault

LEADERSHIP AND TALENT DEVELOPMENT

learn. act. lead. teach. repeat.

~ Mark Healy / Partner / Torque

The days of hoarding information for power are coming to a close. Presidents and CEOs these days – the good ones, anyway – are teachers. Jack Welsh didn't pioneer this idea, but he was ahead of his time while he was in charge of GE, and has helped to popularize the concept of leader-as-teacher in his years (and books) since moving on from GE. One of his mantras was/is: "As a leader, you have to have a teachable point of view."

In an SMB, the teaching aspect of management is even more important. You do not have an army at your disposal to execute on your orders. You have a smaller team, and at the management level likely a very small cohort, of folks you trust to get stuff done. This has to change as you grow. In simple terms, you'll have to trust more people in your business to run with the ball. And the only way you'll have confidence in these people is if they are taught. Probably by you.

At Torque, we have a very simple model we use in our leadership and talent development process: Learn. Act. Lead. Teach. Repeat. We think it is universally applicable – whether you are running a restaurant or an accounting firm or an auto parts plant.

It goes something like this. In every organization, there are job levels, starting at whatever entry level is and working up toward management and eventually the head of the business. From the perspective of the employee, learn, act, lead, teach applies at each level – and repeat means that person has to start over at each level. If you follow the logic through, one implication is once a person reaches the top (and until she/he reinvents herself/himself in role), teaching is a crucial aspect of the job.

LEARN & ACT

Let's not belabour this point. Whether we are talking about someone on your team or you as the head of your organization, learning and acting are the bare minimum. They are what prevent your team member from being fired and you from going bankrupt. A person has to sort out what the job is all about and then do that job well. This is survival.

LEAD

Leading is what separates a few team members from the rest, and what separates many heads of SMBs from everyone else in their business. It is the ability to get others – plural – to do whatever job/role is in question. Leading can come in all kinds of forms, like project management or inspiration or a straight up accountability play. Unfortunately, many professionals I run into feel that once they reach this development stage – a point where they are able to mobilize the organization to get stuff done – their job is done. This will work reasonably until your firm reaches a certain size. Many sociologists feel that the natural break comes when groups of people reach 15. I've experienced this directly – once your team crosses the 15 person threshold, it is difficult to maintain enough contact with each team member to adequately "manage" them. They have to be taught to stand on their own.



TEACH

Teaching is, in turn, what separates great leaders from good ones. If you think about it, teaching should elevate your entire organization. The goal is to pass on what you know so that everyone can do more. It is the opposite of information hoarding. It is empowerment. It is the 'loop closing' stage in the development cycle.

So what do great leaders teach? I've seen five areas where great leaders can coach their peers and team members into better professionals: the job function, the industry, professionalism and ethics, career management and leadership.

1. The Job Function.

This is the obvious first place to start teaching. It is the other end of the learning stick that people on your team are holding onto. It is unreasonable to expect employees to pick everything up on their own. Sure you can pass out manuals or hold training sessions – but most learning happens on-the-job, and is reinforced through action. So teaching the basics plus the nuances and tricks of the job, while vitally important, is only the starting point.

2. The Industry.

This teaching element should be obvious, but often is only skimmed or neglected entirely. If you are bringing someone into your business who is new to your industry, expect that not only will that person not know much about said industry, but also that they will be at a loss as to where to start to get a foothold. Your industry knowledge will be largely informal – a collection of experiences and rules of thumb you will have developed over the years – and probably is all stored in your head. Unless you have been proactive in writing down what you have learned and internalized about your industry, you will have to pull out the best of what you know and pass it along.

3. Professionalism and Ethics.

For some of you, this will be an expectation of your employees. That they come with it when they join your organization, or acquire it quickly as they grow and contribute. I think it is dangerous to assume people will have the same outlook on these topics. One – you never know someone's complete history and what they have seen/been taught in the past. Two – we live and work in a diverse environment now, with different cultural norms in place. For younger or more junior team members, professionalism and ethics might be the most valuable topics you can teach. Juniors tend to stumble their way through situations where their professionalism is tested, and can feel very isolated without coaching here. Creating a non-judgmental environment where your people know they can come to you for advice is a good first step. Proactively passing on "What if..." scenarios and "When I was early in my career" lessons is even better.

4. Career Management.

You can stick your head in the sand and hope that those you develop will never leave you, or you can face reality that you will always experience some turnover (and that it is healthy). Helping your people manage their careers is the right thing to do. It will come back to you in spades, but ultimately if you care about your people you will want to see them succeed wherever they may go. We think it is part of a leader's job to teach those around them how to stay current, how to approach a possible promotion or a transition out of an organization, and how to manage their professional network.

5. Leadership.

The last one is the least obvious. If you are the leader and even somewhat self-aware, you will know a lot about leadership. You will know what works and what doesn't work for you – your style. And you will know what works for others with a different personality or orientation. You will have war stories – good and bad. These lessons are



invaluable to those around you. There's a saying that smart people learn from their mistakes, and smarter people learn from the mistakes of others. Teach your people about how to lead. Tell them about management mistakes, and why they happened, and what you did to fix those situations. The flip side applies too – don't be so humble that you don't also pass on stories about smart moves you've made that have led to great results. Teaching your team how to lead will shorten their development cycles and help your business grow faster or get better.

If you are running a business, carving out time for teaching is part of your job.

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