Early on in my Air Force profession (I retired after 20.5 years), I learned a lot about leadership. Most of that was on my own through books, video tapes (am I dating myself?), and watching admired leaders. Yes, the military offered a lot of leadership training, for which I am grateful, but I most admired leaders who created value and an environment for learning. That’s the leader I wanted to be.

I also learned early on that there is not enough leader development taking place in most organizations. A Gallup Study from 2014 indicates that only 10 percent of new managers possess the skill to manage. Twenty percent exhibit potential if the company invests immediately in development. Gallup further reports that 82 percent of the hiring decisions for managerial roles result in the selection of a candidate who lacks the talent to do the job. If you do the math that means less than one in five managers are ready when the title bar goes in their email signature.

You probably remember the day you became a “leader” (manager, director, etc.) as the day the senior leader in your organization said to you, “You are such a good nurse (or Med Tech, Rad Tech, etc.) How would you like to be the manager?” And, you said, “Yes. Better hours! Better pay!” I was that person. Great lab tech one day. New Lab Director the next. But, was I truly ready? I was not.

So, it has been my lifelong dedication to motivate and concentrate on leader development. Setting up leaders to “step in” to a role, rather than just “stepping up.” There are times when we all have to “step up” to a role because a need arises. However, how much better would it be if a leader were so well prepared that when called upon, they only had to “step in” to the role? Consider this scenario: An athletic coach says to a young player who came off the bench and helped the team win, “You really stepped up today”. However, if that athlete had prepared for years for that opportunity, then they only had to step in.

Today’s leaders need to put people in a position to succeed and set up our talented employees for leadership roles in the future. The dictionary defines the word “set” as this: to position oneself in such a way as to be ready to start, to be ready, and to be in a particular psychological state… of anticipation. It also means a relatively permanent inclination to react in a particular way, or to equip in advance for a particular purpose, or for some use or event. The dictionary also talks about “to set” as putting a seed in the ground. That means it is ready to grow. The conditions are set in place. We plant the seeds of success in those we prepare for leadership so they are ready to roll in the role they will assume. The most important part of that definition is the permanent tendency to react in a particular way. That means trained and ready to go!

There are 8 elements of the “Set Up” that are important:

1. Ensuring you are a good leader
2. Creating the right environment and culture
3. Preparation and development opportunities
4. Urgency and motivation for future leaders
5. An ability to understand the current conditions and atmosphere
6. Patience
7. Delegation and setting the right player
8. Impeccable communication skills

When I talk to leaders across the country about the theme of “set up to step in”, I focus on helping them create the culture for leaders to be set up in place at the organization by committing to leadership development. We have to be good leaders to develop good leaders. We have to create the best setting and ethos to cultivate leader qualities. Look for opportunities to put the right people in the right place for the right purpose. This is what creates a symphony of engagement and productivity. Motivate and connect to purpose in all that you do. Enlighten and share what you know; be transparent. Be patient in the process, knowing this is development and remember where you once were. Communicate. Daily communication is one of the traits that make a great leader.

I am confident that applying the eight elements in this article will create the learning environment so many organizations desire. They will close the gap that exists in leadership preparation. Make it your goal to develop the next generation so they can be “set up to step in.”

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