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LEADERSHIP JOURNAL

Resource

create empowering environments



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CREATING^{an} empowering environment

by gary mayes

As I journey with leaders from around the world, there is a unvarying need for greater manpower and a deep-longing to release latent capacity within their congregation or organization. To say it another way, most leaders crave for a way to increase the horsepower of their organization.

Creating an empowering environment is way to do just that. An empowering environment will release and sustain new expressions of giftedness among your people. It will serve as a greenhouse that cultivates the potential of emerging leaders. It will increase your capacity to accomplish the vision and heartbeat at the core of your existence. It will open a flood-gate of creativity. And, in most cases, it will become so much more fun, you will wonder how you ever settled for anything less.

At the core of an empowering environment is a commitment to release people to make their unique contribution. Most people long for this kind of environment even though they have never experienced it. Building this kind of environment will require developing new skills and new priorities for the time and energy of your leadership.

I have identified six requirements for the environment that effectively empowers and releases people. While there may be a certain logical sequence to their importance, it is crucial to recognize that these need to be cultivated together. These six requirements may prove to be the most strategic set of considerations a senior leader or leadership team can devote themselves to.

1 A REASON

Listed first for emphasis, this may be the most important of all. People need to know there is something worthwhile at stake and that their effort is directly connected to it. Every church, organization, business, or enterprise of any sort is actually populated by volunteers. Even when there is a paycheck involved, employees volunteer themselves to the challenges of the task at hand every day.

However, as people get involved in the demands of their responsibilities they lose sight of the reason behind what they are doing. It isn't a devious plot. It is just human nature. In the midst of detailed and often mundane

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were created to
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those you lead with
resources that will
serve you in the
trenches of real life.

—Gary

steps natural to fulfilling any responsibility, it is human nature to lose sight of the big picture. Individual trees become so important we forget about the forest.

You see, vision has a half-life of seven days. That is to say, no matter how clear and strong the vision for what we are doing is today, seven days from now it will only be half as clear and half as strong. Seven days later another half-life has expired. Within 28 days, regardless of how clear and strong initial vision was, you will be reduced to a meager 6½% of its original strength.

No one is out there looking for ways to fill his or her time. People want a cause that is worthy of sacrifice. They want to give themselves to something that will change the world in some small way. And when they take on a responsibility, those in leadership must help them continue to connect the dots, showing them how what they do is directly related to the capacity of the entire organization to change the world.

Without a compelling reason:

- People are forced to work out of duty or obligation alone. And working solely out of duty is the pathway to burnout.
- People and groups compete for resources based on personality or positional power rather than vision and strategy.
- Turf wars become the order of the day.
- Pettiness reigns! Pettiness is a clear indicator of the absence of compelling vision.

two RESPONSIBILITY

People need to know specifically what they are responsible for. Behavioral expectations, desired outcomes, and much of what we typically think of as the important parts of a job description are included in this requirement. Yet, beyond what is written on a page, everyone of us wants to know that we have a strategic assignment so important that if we miss it then the whole team—the whole mission—will suffer. To use a sports analogy, people need to know what their “blocking assignment” is and that if they miss their block, the quarterback is going down.

Some corollaries to this requirement: Help people discover God’s unique calling and shaping on their life; mobilize people according to their calling and passion versus recruiting them to an ‘open slot;’ develop and communicate effective job descriptions.

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Without a clear sense of responsibility:

- People struggle with role confusion: Who is responsible for what? What do people expect me to be doing?
- You'll succumb to the virus of creative paralysis, there are no boundaries on the playground.
- Differing assumptions will breed miscommunication.
- People will discover the nagging fear of "doing it" wrong or worse, they won't give their energy to what really matters. We want to give ourselves to a task that is demanding and significant.
- Senior leaders end up micro-managing people who don't know enough about what they need to be doing to think ahead nor solve their own problems.

three RESOURCES

If people are going to be able to carry out the responsibilities they have been given, they must be provided the resources they need to do so. Unfortunately, it is common for those with defined responsibility to be operating "short-handed" in terms materials, finances, and equipment.

However, in addition to these obvious needs, the requirement of resourcing people goes much further. Other resourcing needs include: the training needed to develop genuine proficiency; targeted assistance to work on problem solving; mentoring devoted leadership development; adequate access to new ideas; and enough information about the bigger picture of the organization so that people have the ability to make effective decisions, (ie. financial status, major projects, goals, new personnel, etc.)

Without adequate resourcing:

- There is a nagging sense of disempowerment that grows in people when they don't have the tools, resources, or information needed to truly succeed. All of us want to make a real impact, but can't do it without resources.
- People feel set up for failure.
- The feeling of "being over my head" may stimulate energy to learn

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and grow for a while, but over time it erodes confidence in someone's ability to do a job well.

four RELATIONSHIPS

All of us want to know that we are part of a team. We want to know that we work alongside people who share the load with us and are committed to our well being as much as they are committed to the task at hand. We want to know that we have people who are, "watching my back." Granted, people are wired differently and some need more relational support than others, but no one wants to be sent out to play a position and then ignored.

Meeting this relational need means creating time for encouragement as well as time for shared learning and growth. Ministry is about the work that we do and about the people we do it with. Carl George's concept of the Huddle for the community of leaders who make things happen is exactly on point. Unfortunately human nature makes it easy for many leaders to worry more about the production of their people than about the people who produce.

Without adequate relationships:

- We lose perspective, especially in the midst of demanding responsibility.
- Mentoring becomes formal, often wooden, rather than natural and easy to sustain.
- People can be destabilized or demoralized by problems.
- People focus on the task alone and miss God's unique and ongoing work in them as they serve.
- People reproduce a task-driven production-dominated approach among those they lead rather than developing the people they lead.

five REVIEW

One way to honor the work people do is to review it's quality and quantity. By never reviewing it, we dishonor the sacrifice they have made. How can you know how to resource someone without knowing how things are going? How can you provide problem-solving support without knowing what the problems

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are? If the mission of your organization matters, then the contribution of your leaders and the work they do to carry out that mission matters, too.

Unfortunately, many people have experienced periodic assessment as a club held over their heads. Instead, it should be a regular two-way dialogue and opportunity to advance the cause. Regular performance reviews should be a chance to support your people, a chance to capture learnings as they occur. Regular review is a far cry from controlling accountability. Done well, this kind of review should accelerate individual and corporate capacity.

Without effective review:

- People can feel undervalued. After all, they have given so much of themselves, often sacrificially, and it feels no one is paying attention.
- Problems that arise become forest fires before they are dealt with. And forest fires take a huge toll, not only on what they burn, but on the people it takes to put them out.
- People have trouble keeping the dots connected: ie. “Remind me again how the thing I am doing makes a difference?”
- Efforts at training and developing your people are disconnected from real needs. They become arbitrary academic experiences rather than strategies for supporting personal development.

 **SIX RISK**

The freedom to risk is directly connected to the freedom to innovate. All innovation, all creativity, all new ideas are inherently risky. In fact, in a world that is changing at light speed, even doing what has been tried and true in the past can be risky. There are no guarantees of success. Therefore, it is critical to build a culture where there is the freedom to fail. When someone truly has the freedom to fail without undue fear of personal repercussion then they have the freedom to risk.

And when your people have the freedom to risk, they have the freedom to innovate!

One wild thought. Most organizations would be well-served by learning to honor—even celebrate—those who fail. We say more about desired behavior by whom we choose to honor than almost any other corporate activity. By celebrating people who failed in spite of the quantity or quality of their efforts we are elevating the value of risk and innovation. I don’t me we should honor people who failed out of laziness or carelessness. But we will empower people throughout the organization when we esteem the efforts and initiative

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of those who failed in addition to those who succeeded.

It is essential to note that creating an environment that nurtures risk will challenge the ability of leadership to release control. It will challenge the willingness of leaders to trust other people. And it will surface the character-based issues of reputation and ambition. Leaders who move forward on this will have to face those personal fears that sound like this: What will others think of me if our organization stumbles? What if we release people to try new things and they succeed better than I would have? What if someone else's new idea diverts attention and resources from my agendas?

Without a culture of risk:

- You inhibit freedom to innovate or pioneer what's new.
- People live in fear of judgment, failure, or disapproval rather than in the confidence of support and encouragement.
- The size of an organization's collective comfort zone actually decreases... we move further and further away from the edge.
- Potential leaders are neither discovered nor appreciated. New leaders cannot be developed without the freedom to lead.
- There is a steady loss of leaders. Leaders want a place to serve that will allow them to lead, an opportunity to enlarge the tent, a place where they are trusted to use their gifts. Over time, organizational "leadership" positions are filled by those committed to the status quo.

A SUGGESTION

Reprint this article for the team of leaders with whom you work and after discussing the meaning of these six essentials, have everyone complete the assessment on the following page together. Then take time to process a way forward together.

Other materials and resources are available online at www.noredcapEs.com.

CREATING^{an} empowering environment

Assessment and Discussion Guide

How do you rate the way you and your organization empower leaders?
[place an "X" on the line corresponding to your assessment of your behavior.]

A REASON – Leaders know there is something worthwhile at stake and that their effort is directly connected to it.

1 ----- 5 ----- 10
Not like us Describes us
at all perfectly

RESPONSIBILITY – Leaders know what they are specifically responsible for.

1 ----- 5 ----- 10
Not like us Describes us
at all perfectly

RESOURCES – Leaders are provided the resources to carry out their responsibilities.

1 ----- 5 ----- 10
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RELATIONSHIPS – Leaders know that they are part of a team of people sharing the load and "watching their backs."

1 ----- 5 ----- 10
Not like us Describes us
at all perfectly

REVIEW – Leaders know that their contribution matters because the team reviews the quality and quantity of the work they do.

1 ----- 5 ----- 10
Not like us Describes us
at all perfectly

RISK – Leaders are given freedom to risk and innovate without fear of personal repercussions.

1 ----- 5 ----- 10
Not like us Describes us
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1. Which of the six characteristics do you most strongly resist? Why?
2. Which would be easiest for you to strengthen?
3. What are the 2 things you could do in the next 30-45 days to begin the process of developing more of an empowering organization?

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