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HUMAN RESOURCES SPOTLIGHT

How HR Can Win Buy-In from Skeptics on Communications Coaching:

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By Suzanne Bates

Communicating vision and values is essential in driving business results. By definition, leaders cannot do the work of the enterprise; they can only communicate what needs to be done, inspire trust, and motivate others to execute the plans.

Many admired leaders are able to inspire people to action by articulating vision, achieving buy-in, and moving the enterprise forward through effective communication. But, others can fail to get their message across even though they are intelligent, analytical, and decisive leaders. Human resource professionals know that consequences are serious if leaders cannot successfully communicate a vision. Executives must do this or they will fail. One role of HR professionals is to recognize when there is an issue, and then help leaders to further develop their communication skills.

Why don't more leaders communicate effectively? There are several reasons. Few business schools teach the techniques, and few companies devote significant resources to them. Companies tend to evaluate leaders on management and leadership criteria that do not emphasize effective communication. Even if communication is mentioned in the professional development plan, the organization may not have the adequate resources. And, with numerous business priorities, individuals may resist devoting time and energy to communication.

The result is that executives often don't "discover" they need to speak well until a problem presents itself. They arrive at a new level and suddenly their skills are not up to par. They may give PowerPoint presentations on their business, but those are informative, not visionary. They do not know how to exude passion or describe a comprehensive vision that gets people moving ahead together.

Recognizing this issue is often the job of Human Resources. HR professionals can and should provide the necessary support and coaching for senior managers. To support them, you must be

able to evaluate the ROI of various types of training, and then win buy-in from skeptical leaders who don't always place a high priority on communication.

Many leaders receive only vague feedback on their communication skills. When they do, it's typically related to interpersonal skills. They receive very little if any information on how they present their ideas, other than some basic pointers on how to stand, what to do with their hands, or how to use PowerPoint.

Winning Buy-In From Skeptical Leaders

As an HR professional, you know how important it is to form a business partnership with the leadership team. Our HR clients who succeed in bringing in a robust professional development program to their organizations and who win buy-in to spend the sufficient resources on this, do a good job of asking questions and articulating how their plans will help the business.

One important thing we have learned through years of communication coaching: leaders do not decide to spend resources on what they should do; they spend resources on what they must do. Organizations decide to invest, or invest further, in communication training and development as a result of one of several precipitating events or urgent needs, for instance:

- You receive negative feedback about a high-potential leader or a current leader who has other valuable business skills, and you don't want to lose him or her.
- You place a leader in a new role or bring on a relatively inexperienced team, and need to get everyone off on the right foot.
- A survey or feedback program reveals a serious breakdown in communication among individuals or a group.
- You want to groom an individual or emerging leadership group to move the succession plan forward.
- You have a new initiative, a major change, or a new project that requires you to communicate your vision clearly and win buy-in from internal and external audiences.
- The company wants to achieve a specific goal such as increasing sales, improving the stock price, enhancing customer relations, or anything that will drive business results.
- You have a major upcoming event, such as an annual meeting, marketing conference, keynote opportunity for an executive, company-wide employee meeting, important board meeting, road show, or pending merger or sale.
- Part of the company's business strategy is to position some experts as thought leaders in the industry and attract positive attention through media or marketing.

These precipitating events are a good time to raise the subject of communications development. Leaders will be more receptive to it and more willing to engage in conversation about it, endorse it, and get behind it.

HR Executives have an opportunity at this juncture to show they maintain a view from the top. By asserting how current situations or events, as noted in the above, may impede corporate success, they may press for communication skill development as a means to improve the outcome

As an outside communication consultant, I have learned that asking a lot of questions eventually leads to buy-in. By this method, I find out about challenges the organization and the individual executive face. I also gain better information, build rapport, demonstrate my expertise, and lead executives to reach their own conclusions, rather than me telling them what they need.

Good questions to ask are:

- What do we want to achieve in the next 1-2 years?
- What is standing in our way?
- How does communication play a role?
- Where do you see our gaps, when it comes to communication?
- What will happen if we do nothing?
- What difference would it make to us if we achieve these goals?
- What is it costing not to invest in this?
- How would you want to measure improved performance?

As an HR leader you're aware that many of your executives are confident people who have risen to the top of their game and don't always articulate a concern about their effectiveness as communicators. They feel comfortable getting up in front of a group and giving a presentation. That, of course, does not make them inspirational speakers or leaders. Therefore, it's up to the HR professionals in any organization to make sure that their senior executives, regardless of their level of confidence, are truly up to the task of motivating employees and communicating corporate messages to other constituencies.