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A CALL FOR LEADERS: WHAT EMPLOYEES REALLY WANT

Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.
—Peter F. Drucker

Type in “leadership” on any internet search site, and you will come across thousands of quotes like the one above from Peter Drucker, author of 30 books including *Innovation and Entrepreneurship*. Lots of wise people have something to say about leadership, and each attempts to convey—in as few words as possible—what it really means.

While these bits of wisdom are eloquent and thought-provoking, they don’t tell us what leaders should be doing. In today’s business world leaders need to know how to do it right.

We decided to find out what American business leaders could do better, by asking their employees. In our 2004 online survey *How Does Your Boss Communicate?*, we polled 293 professionals nationwide to evaluate the leadership communication skills of their bosses—rating different sets of skills, defining authentic leadership characteristics, and offering suggestions for improvement. The response was overwhelming and we heard lots of valuable advice.

Many people say the communication skills of their bosses are lacking. In fact, less than one-third believe their organizations have true voices of leadership—a disheartening reality that should send up a red flag to management everywhere.

How can companies develop more true, authentic voices of leadership throughout their organizations? Participants gave thoughtful, genuine advice that fell into six natural categories. Here they are.

1. Share more information.

Leaders should have a vision and be able to articulate it. In terms of information, more is better. In their view, authentic leaders and strong communicators also share information that increases their understanding of—and commitment to—the big picture.

2. Keep it real.

How information is shared is also key. Demeanor, use of language and nonverbal skills contribute to credibility—which creates trust. A truly strong communicator is truthful and open, whether the news is good or bad. “Say what you think and think what you say” was an often-quoted phrase that summed up this point.

3. Listen.

There’s a strong desire for more and better two-way communication with leadership. Be more open to others’ thoughts, actively seek ideas and feedback. Listen to know who’s doing a good job and follow with praise. “Listen to people in the trenches.”

4. Walk the walk.

Leaders are judged by how well their words, their demeanor, and their actions match up. Following through is critical to gaining the respect of the organization. This involves not only “the doing” but communicating in a way that underscores consistency between rhetoric and reality.

5. Know the organization & its people.

Employees want leaders who are accessible, to genuinely get to know them and their work. Soak up knowledge by walking around, see how the staff work, listen to their language and challenges, and learn about them as both professionals and people.

6. Delegate—and trust.

People in an organization have been hired because they bring particular knowledge and skills to their positions. Give people the authority to do what needs to be done. Trust employees to do the job right. Give them feedback and credit where it’s due.