



Focus

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Leaders As Teachers

“One of the primary roles of a leader is to teach,” says Ed Ludwig, Chairman & CEO of medical technology company Becton Dickinson. Unfortunately, many medium-sized companies waste profit potential by ignoring this vital leadership role.

Of course, small and large organizations may also squander opportunities because leaders don’t teach, but I singled out medium-sized businesses for two reasons. First, teaching by the leader is almost automatic in small firms. This teaching is usually informal, but the leader’s involvement with most aspects of the business offers many opportunities to pass on knowledge. Second, most large businesses recognize the importance of employee training and senior managers are often involved. As one of many examples, the CEO of General Electric, famous for its leadership development, regularly teaches at the company’s Crotonville, NY learning center.

In any case, the leader should get involved in teaching for two reasons, namely:

- Sharing knowledge and developing employee skills boosts productivity and profit. When the CEO leads by example, other managers know teaching is important.
- A teacher often learns more than the students and the leader gains important – sometimes vital – insights when he or she gets closer to the action. The more geographically spread out the company, the more important it is for the leader to interact with employees in locations remote from corporate headquarters.

A wise leader also understands that encouraging teaching and learning has benefits beyond profit and eyes-on knowledge. When teaching others, the leader has a forum to consistently demonstrate company values, strengthen the culture, and set expectations for performance.

Also, when a leader puts on his teaching hat, the mental filters that control what information he notices shift in subtle and important ways. For example, the leader might overhear a comment that generates a question that ultimately leads to one of those Aha! moments of insight. Consider, for instance, a discovery that many employees were not using important tools to their full capacity. This could impact productivity, equipment costs, and even safety.

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Here's a real-life example of that. A company had an expensive office copier that was heavily used but for which there was no training. Employees were expected to figure it out by themselves. One day an accounting clerk asked an executive assistant why she was ordering copy paper with pre-punched holes for ring binders. The simple reason was, of course, no one had bothered to tell the assistant that the copier could punch holes in paper. Now, replace "copier" with an appropriate machine or software package used in your business and imagine how often something similar happens.

Of course, the really important knowledge has nothing to do with tools or office equipment! The really important knowledge involves the values we hold dear and the company's top goals.

In the end, more effective teaching makes any organization better, and in business "better" usually means more competitive. Improving competitiveness is mostly about execution, and in that regard basic blocking and tackling activities are usually the game winners. And think about this: most businesses only do a few things, repeated thousands and thousands of times. If you think that's too simplistic, that's how the former CEO of BP (British Petroleum) once described his global enterprise.

Great companies get remarkable performance from ordinary people. Great leaders understand that their personal involvement in teaching motivates employees to use their talents and individual insights to make the company better.

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