Servant leadership (not an oxymoron)

RICK BRIMEYER

Brimeyer LLC

He is president of the Ames, Iowa, consulting business

Much has been written about the unique Toyota culture, which is central to the company's success. And I've read a lot of it.

But nothing I read had the impact of listening to Tracey Richardson recently at a seminar sponsored by the Iowa Lean Consortium.

Richardson, while in her teens, was hired as a line worker as Toyota launched production in its first U.S. plant in Georgetown, Ky., in 1988.

She opted to quit college, deciding that "Toyota will be my college education." While that might be a risky decision with most companies, it's turned out pretty nicely for her.

Today she is a successful consultant, thanks to the development she received at Toyota. That says a lot about Richardson's initiative, but volumes about Toyota where the clear expectation is that supervisors spend 50 percent of their time developing employees. I'm guessing that's 10 times the national average.

The concept that leaders are there for their employees, and not vice versa, is often called servant leadership. It turns the traditional organizational chart upside down, placing front-line workers at the top.

These are the folks "shaking hands with customers" every day, either by building and packaging the product in the case of manufacturing or directly taking care of customers in service industries.

RICK SAYS ...

These are not celebrity leaders whose companies go into decline when they move on. They are more concerned with building a team than with taking credit. They are more apt to ask the right questions and develop people than provide answers.

Front line supervisors and support staff are next on the inverted organization chart, providing whatever front-line workers need to get the job done.

That includes personal development, so that employees' capacity to solve problems and add more value increases. Likewise, managers are listed below supervisors and on down to the CEO. Each subsequent layer is responsible for developing and serving those above them on the chart.

As Brian Dieter, CEO at Mary Greeley Medical Center, tells employees, "There are only two jobs here … taking care of patients and taking care of those who take care of patients."

Unfortunately, on-the-job trappings often increase with each subsequent promotion. One physically moves from the floor to a desk job, then to a personal office, next to an office with an administrative assistant to filter "interruptions" and finally to a mahogany boardroom.

It's not surprising then that many new supervisors and managers physically and mentally separate themselves from the very people they are asked to lead. They fall into the trap of believing they have "earned" the right to exercise power due to their location on the ladder.

It's therefore critical that organizations select supervisors and managers based on their observed ability to help others. Expectations for developing employees should be clearly communicated and measured, including how much time is physically spent each day when the work is performed.

Organizations must challenge their policies to ensure that they are supporting a servant leadership philosophy.

Increased pay is appropriate for a skilled supervisor who increases the effectiveness of several employees. But other more visible distinctions that favor management should be discouraged.

For example, my disdain for executive parking spaces rivals my feelings for disco music. Fortunately, both lost favor in most places by the 1980s. But Mary Greeley Medical Center took it a step further.

When an expansion project temporarily reduced parking capacity, the hospital required its managers to park at a lot two blocks off-site. That sent a strong message to front-line employees that they were valued, especially in light of Iowa's often less-than-ideal weather.

OK, all this is nice, but does it pay off? It certainly has for Toyota.

In his best-seller "Good to Great," author Jim Collins identified seven distinguishing factors of companies that were able to sustain outstanding results for several years. He termed one of those factors "Level 5 Leaders," those possessing both "personal humility" and "professional will."

These are not celebrity leaders whose companies go into decline when they move on. They are more concerned with building a team than with taking credit. They are more apt to ask the right questions and develop people than provide answers. They are akin to a humble all-star offensive lineman, not an outspoken quarterback or wide receiver.

Whenever I hear a leader explain how much the organization has grown since they came on board, I gently remind them that the true measure of their effectiveness will be how much it grows in the 10 years after they leave.