

# EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES

(from the dog)



WE LIVE IN A WORLD THAT requires rapid responses, wise decisions, and strategic management of resources. Our leaders have to be able to simultaneously manage multiple tasks, juggle personnel, garner public support, and manage to have a picturesque home life □ all while looking good on TV.

Working with people and getting them to do what you want is a vital component to running any successful organization, whether in business or in government.

In all realms of leadership, there are guiding principles. In today's political arena, it can be a dog-eat-dog (although this would be very bad behavior) world.

There are thousands of books on the market about how to lead people. Some classics have been around for hundreds of years (or maybe it just seems that way). But the problems facing managers and leaders today call for a different approach than yesteryear.

□ Work ethics seem to have gone out the window. □

□ I can't get my new workers to get along with my senior people. □

□ No one seems to care any more about what we do here. □

□ Generation X and Y don't talk to each other. □

Sound familiar? These and other complaints reflect real problems, and they manifest themselves in lost

productivity, employee frustration, diminished communication, and slow or mixed responses back to customers.

What is a manager or supervisor to do?

*Leadership Lessons from the Dog* employs a systematic approach that works with people from diverse backgrounds, of all ages, at all levels of the organization, and, of course, with all dog breeds.

The following three executive strategies are key to remember when dealing with people at work, in the field, at home, and of course, with the dog.

## Reward good behavior.

It sounds so easy and so simple, yet most managers don't reward people when they do great work. Most supervisors provide only the required yearly feedback, repeating tired lines about how valued the employee is to the organization. A year later, the process gets repeated, with very little feedback (or feed-forward, as Alan Vengel says). After 20 years, maybe a pin is included with the debriefing.

The rest of the time, employees generally are ignored by their managers unless there is a major problem. In many organizations, □ feedback □ is synonymous with negative counseling. How often have you been asked to go see the boss? Was your first reaction a delighted □ Yippee! □ and wild enthusiasm? Probably not.

Good behavior is seldom rewarded or acknowledged as it should be. Positive reinforcement is sadly lacking by many managers.

How do you reward employees?

Rewarding employees is best if it is for a specific action, is meaningful to the employee, and does not come at the expense of others. (I don't love Employee of the Month type competitions, because they pit people against each other.) Saying □ thank-you □ and acknowledging the contribution is far more important than a material token of appreciation, but if you can actually reward someone tangibly, that is fantastic.

A few suggestions for rewarding employees: time off; cash; public recognition or profiling; gifts such as mugs, pens, gift certificates; or anything personalized and that can be presented tastefully (I once received embroidered collars for my dogs, and I am touched every time I use them); more training opportunities to help employees advance; endorse the employee for promotion; bring in lunch for the office team; write a thank-you note.

When gifting, people need to feel as though the reward is about them. Giving a non-sports fan a pair of Rockies tickets isn't much of a reward.

Go ahead and ask your friends at your next social gathering, □ How many people in your workplace feel their

efforts are appreciated? If people work hard, are they somehow rewarded for their results? Or do hard workers just get more work? □

A manager's natural inclination is to give the people who always get good results the hardest and most visible projects. When you really need something done right, on time, and within budget, you give it to □John, □your hardworking, reliable employee, even though it is □Steve's □job.

The people who do the terrific work often get punished by being assigned more work, while, paradoxically, those who don't do their jobs as they should, get rewarded with fewer responsibilities and easier schedules.

This is unfair □ both to the reliable worker and to the coworker who is not pulling his or her fair share. So how do we fix the problem? We take a training lesson from our dogs.

When training my puppy, I say □sit, □ while maneuvering her squirming furry form into a sitting position. Then she gets a treat. I repeat the process. Within days — she figured out this treat idea *fast* □ she knew what to do. If she sat when I said □sit □right away, she got a treat. Once she learned to associate the right behavior with a treat, she only got a treat *if* she accomplished the behavior (sit when asked). If she doesn't sit, I help her into a sit, while reminding her

that this position is a □sit □□ but no treat. She learned very quickly that treats are delivered only when she does the right thing at the right time. This process gets repeated. And repeated. So now she knows exactly what is expected of her. And she does it because her good behavior gets rewarded. So now I can depend on her to sit when I ask. Training is completed, expectations are clear, and rewards are given.

Frequently, however, we don't apply rewards to people. We forget to verbally thank them for doing a good job. We don't write the note to show appreciation. We neglect to inform them that what they are doing is correct, noticed, and appreciated. We don't reward good behavior. Instead, what usually happens? When people work hard and are dependable, they are the first ones to get tasked with doing more work. Which leads to the next strategy.

### **Don't reward bad behavior.**

This sounds simple, but in the workplace, it's difficult. When employees are not performing the way they should, they often are ignored rather than sent

for training or (gently) corrected on the spot.

Many times supervisors don't take actions to remedy poor performance. Why? Because it is easier not to take any action at all. Some managers don't counsel or train employees when they see a problem because they: a) hope the performance will get better on its own; b) are afraid of confrontation; c) are afraid of not being popular or liked by the employees; d) fear escalation of the workplace tension; or e) hope (mistakenly) that the bad behavior will stop on its own. Unfortunately, not only is this a fainthearted management practice, but it is unfair to the employee. How are employees supposed to know that what they are doing is wrong if their supervisors don't tell them?

If you continue to allow □Martha □to show up 30 minutes late, not deliver on projects, and annoy constituents, will she perform better tomorrow? Next week? Without providing feedback that alerts her to poor performance (□Martha, I'd like you to show up at 8 a.m. with everyone else □), it is unreasonable to expect her to know that what she is

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doing is wrong. Maybe when Martha first arrived, she was told to show up at 8:30 a.m.

We don't expect dogs to know better unless we teach them, and it is not much different for people.

Rottweilers, pit bulls, and Dobermans are big dogs and, therefore, generally are trained because their (responsible) owners know they must train them. People think they can be dangerous because they are large, have big teeth, and often are portrayed in movies as vicious attack dogs.

I confess I am more afraid of an unknown Chihuahua than a Doberman. Why? A Chihuahua lives much of its life in someone's purse. When it gets scared, barks, or shakes the dog's owner's natural reaction is to pick up the quivering canine and reassure it by petting its tiny little head, saying "That's all right, Godzilla" even while the Chihuahua bares its teeth and growls.

That is not acceptable behavior by either the dog or its owner. The owner is reinforcing the undesired behavior, and that same owner is then surprised when the dog gives him or her more of the growling, barking, and snarling. (I do really like Chihuahuas, by the way. I don't want hate mail from people who live with Chihuahuas. If you currently own a Chihuahua and you bring a picture of you with your Chihuahua to my talk and you mention this article, I will give you a free book, just because I use Chihuahuas as my example.)

The point is that the Chihuahua's bad behavior gets reinforced more frequently than bad behavior by a Doberman, so therefore the little dog does more growling, barking, and snarling.

Dogs respond to incentives, both good and bad. People do, too.

It is especially unfair to the great employees, who are doing the work of their coworkers because their managers rely on them to always get the job accomplished, no matter what; and their managers don't give them the authority to correct others.

Workers have a right to know if what they are doing is not up to standards. By allowing unacceptable behavior to continue, the manager is tacitly approving poor performance, which encourages more substandard behavior. It also sends the message to other employees that there is little incentive to strive for good work.

As a leader, guiding people who are not doing what you want wastes both time and resources. Few of us have an excess of either.

My dog trainer reiterates this principle. Rewarding or allowing bad behavior creates more of the same. You get what you reward! The key to good performance is to reward good behavior and gently (if possible) correct bad behavior, every time. Which leads to the third strategy.

### **Be consistent.**

This is the toughest rule to apply, because to be a really good leader you have to do it all the time. One of the major complaints from employees is that organizations and managers randomly enforce rules. Lack of consistency creates uncertainty, confusion, disorder, and disdain.

Some great advice from my dog's breeder: "There is no 'sometimes' in a dog's life."

For example: You cuddle with your new St. Bernard puppy, Tiny, on the couch for the first six months of the dog's life. You pet the puppy on the couch and you watch TV together, and life is grand. Then you suddenly realize that you don't

want a 250-pound St. Bernard on your couch when grandma comes to visit. When the dog jumps on the couch to cuddle with Grandma Polly, you yell at the dog. This is patently unfair to the dog, and the dog is, rightfully, confused and frustrated with your guidance and direction. "How is this wrong when you told me it was okay yesterday? And it was okay for these past six months? In fact, *you* taught *me* to jump up on this couch!"

There is no "sometimes" in a dog's life. If you don't want the 250-pound dog to be on the couch, don't let the 10-pound puppy on the couch.

The complaint is the same for people. "How is this suddenly wrong when I've been doing my job this way for six months?" Applying the standards fairly is part of being a good leader. That doesn't mean there aren't exceptions, but good managers know when exceptions are warranted. If you don't want Martha coming in late, let her know right away, not six months into the job. Don't wait until it is performance appraisal time to tell her what you should have told her on the second day.

So when people do their jobs well, look for ways to reward them. When employees don't do their jobs as expected, managers should first make sure that the employees understand what is expected of them. Have they been properly trained? Do they have the proper tools needed to successfully complete the task? Then leaders try to help employees find the right way to perform. Leaders have to do this all the time.

If every time I did something really well my boss gave me a treat, like a mocha latte (I am easily motivated by Starbucks cards), I would be encouraged. Inspired. Enthusiastic. Cheerful. Also caffeinated. But eager and ready to do more work.