What They Didn’t Teach Us in Black-Belt Training

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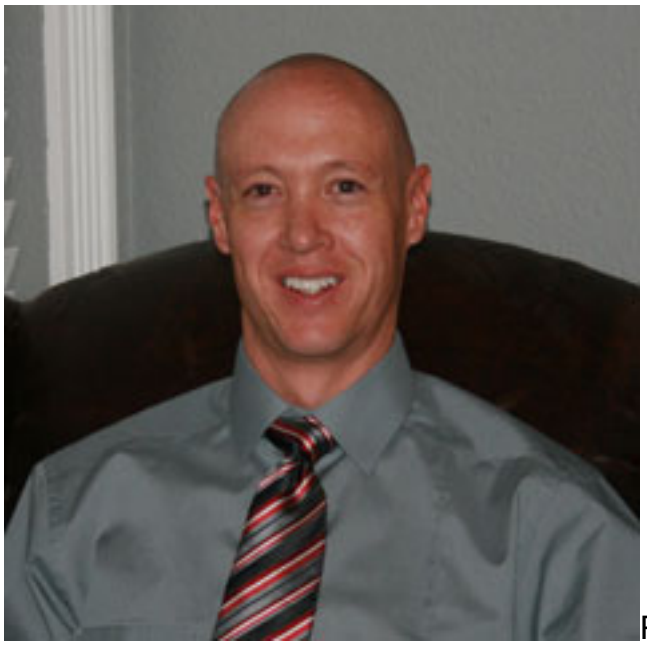

Regardless of the process improvement, business improvement or innovation methodology training, almost all of them focus on teaching us tools and methods. They don’t teach us how to lead the implementation. Here is a short list of the things we change leaders need to do to succeed.

Adopting a methodology or changing the way we do things in order to improve performance requires leadership. Unfortunately, the training courses we have all attended that teach us about the various programs and methodologies don’t teach us how to lead them.

Many of them provide a framework with some metrics and maybe even a plan for the implementation of certain elements, but that’s not leadership. Without leadership, all the plans, tools, and training in the world won’t make the change happen or succeed.

While preparing a discussion with third, fourth and fifth graders at a local elementary school on the subject of leadership, I was forced to boil down all of the leadership mentoring, training, tutoring, and experience I have received into a rather concise list that fits most scopes of leadership reasonably well. It was a really eye-opening exercise. Let me share that list with you.

Regardless of whether we are the executive of a large business, a change agent inside of a business, or a coach of a little league softball team, this list of things leaders must do fits. Here it is:

1. Instruct or teach.
2. Inspire participation.
3. Set a vision, including expectations and goals.
4. Provide resources.
5. Be involved.
6. Set and enforce rules.
7. Understand what is needed.
8. Communicate.
9. Serve the needs of his/her team and customers.

I know it doesn’t look like a very profound list at first glance, but in going through all of my resources on leadership, I found a great deal of insight on the characteristics, methods, and behaviors of effective leaders, but not one list of what leaders actually do.

Here is how we can use the list above. When our efforts to coerce, compel, or drive change and improvement is meeting resistance or simply not taking shape, chances are one or more of the things on the list are not being satisfied. Look to the list and see if you can find those things and put more focus on them.

I believe leaders are teachers more than anything else. Even when it comes to enforcing rules and holding expectations we are teaching those rules and expectations. Likewise, when we must correct behavior, we are teaching what behavior we desire or expect. In short, every hiccup or thing-gone-wrong or misunderstanding is a teaching opportunity.

Those teams and those systems or processes that work most effectively are those that include well-trained, highly proficient people. Building those skills is often the greatest contributor to success. Make sure that education is a big part of your change effort.

If we want people to adopt our methods or changes we must inspire them to do so. We must motivate them to want to participate. The lowest form of inspiration is, “Join me or die.” It is better to touch each individual's concerns and motivators and help them see how participation is better than resistance.

Lack of progress or outright resistance result from a shortfall of inspiration. To inspire, touch individuals’ needs and address their concerns.

It’s hard to get everyone pointed in a common direction if the vision and direction isn’t clear. Leaders must set a vision and clarify what “success” looks like. Then we must communicate a plan and set expectations that enable that vision to unfold.

The expectations that forward the vision are also our expectations that people engage the elements we have trained them to use. It is part of the follow through on the education. We teach, and then we expect utilization and performance.

Success is no less dependent upon vision, expectations, and training than it is being set up to succeed. This means we must provide the resources our teams, systems,

or processes need to meet expectations and fulfill our vision. It is our responsibility as leaders to produce those resources.

We must also be continuously involved. This is not an excuse to micro-manage. However, how can we correct behavior, educate, understand people’s needs, anticipate problems, or continually correct course toward a vision if we are not engaged with our teams? We must participate.

Sometimes, particularly when making changes, the rules of engagement come into question. As leaders we must set and enforce the rules. Many times these are not rules we dictated, but we are still responsible to uphold. Make sure that as you drive change, you are not letting others operate outside of the rules.

Perhaps the most important activity or task or responsibility of a leader is to understand what his or her people and customers need. This often requires alertness and active inquiry; it takes work. Seek perpetually to understand the challenges, concerns, and needs. If we don’t understand, we can’t help.

Help might come from us, personally, or it might come from others. Leaders, along with teaching, are constantly communicating. We must communicate the vision, expectations, and rules effectively, but we must also communicate what is happening, what is working and what isn’t working, and the opportunities for everyone to help.

Helping, is the whole purpose of a leader. We have more sophisticated words we like to use like empower, enable, facilitate, engage, and etc., but they all boil down to helping. This shouldn’t have to be said, but sometimes we need to hear it: it’s not about what the king wants; it’s about what the people need. As leaders we serve our teams and our customers, they don’t serve us.

There you have it: A concise list of leadership actions. I know there isn’t anything here that you didn’t already know. At least I hope there isn’t. But, when was the last time you sat down with a checklist like this and asked if you were doing all of the things you need to be doing? I never even had a real checklist until I made this one while preparing to talk with the elementary school students.

I offer the list to the reader. Add to it or reword it, as you like. Use it when making your change plans to make sure you have a plan for every action. As your changes are moving forward or, more importantly, as they are struggling to move forward, examine the list and see if you can identify which action is under-satisfied.

If you can find the element that is underperforming, it becomes easier to correct your actions and put your time and energy where you need to facilitate the change. While I feel this list fits most any leadership role, it’s the change agents who have the toughest leadership challenge.

Most change agents don’t have true authority to force the changes they are responsible to drive. Even when management says, “Of course you have authority,” we don’t. In the end, the people involved don’t report to us and we can’t resort to

the “join me or die” ultimatum. Therefore, we need the above list all the more.

If the change we are trying to make requires more resources, we must go to those who can produce them and inspire them to commit the resources. We must understand what is standing in the way of the change and address it; possibly by teaching, by communicating, by setting and enforcing rules, by clarifying expectations, or by otherwise serving people’s needs. The best way to understand is to be involved.

Take my plainly simple list down and keep it handy. I sincerely hope it will help identify the change leadership gaps that might be manifesting and give you the opportunity to close them.

Stay wise, friends.

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