

## EXECUTIVE INSIGHTS



# Key skills set successful business leaders apart

A good manager is someone who commands respect and asserts his or her authority while working happily and productively with the team

**EVERY SENIOR EXECUTIVE** who has made it to the top would have his or her own story about the key turning points and important decisions they made along the way. They may not realise, however, that qualities they regard as distinct and individual are, in fact, probably shared by most of their peers.

Research shows that successful business leaders invariably have four key skills: they can establish strong relationships; hire, build and lead teams; produce results; and adapt to changing demands.

If you focus on enhancing your ability in these key areas, you can be sure your career is heading in the right direction. We can build the necessary skills by making use of 20 specific strategies.

This week we will examine the first 10 strategies, which focus on interpersonal skills and leading teams.

A good manager should be able to command respect, assert authority and work with all kinds of people. This depends not only on making your views clear but also on listening closely when appropriate, encouraging others to speak up, showing yourself as trustworthy and knowing when to keep silent. It is important to realise that improving interpersonal skills starts with an honest self-assessment and a determination to correct negative types of behaviour.

If you are uncertain where to start, consider the following steps:

#### Identify the problem

Usually we can tell when a relationship is not working well. To turn things around, try to identify what makes the other person react negatively. For example, you might be in the habit of interrupting presentations at weekly staff meetings, something that is bound to cause irritation. Next time, allow your colleagues to complete their reports and then ask questions.

Small things like this can make a big difference.

Be specific – as a manager you should not hesitate to point out things your subordinates could be doing to better their interpersonal skills.

#### Build on existing relationships

A manager with good interpersonal skills will make an effort to solicit feedback. This could come from regular meetings or from spending a few minutes talking to staff in the course of the working day or

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week. This approach helps to cement relationships and encourages people to talk more openly.

Of course, this works only if the manager is genuinely interested in what his staff have to say. Employees are quick to detect insincerity.

#### Display empathy

You may be the boss but that does not mean you know everything. Show due respect when others are talking and listen without pre-judging. Also, take your employees' feelings and perspectives into account. Nothing frustrates more than the feeling that the boss could not care less about your problem, or appears to trivialise it.

If someone has raised a genuine concern, do not make light of it, and if information is shared in confidence, keep it private and preserve your credibility.

#### Learn to listen

Hearing is not the same as listening. If a team member has something to say, give him or her your full attention. You will give wrong signals if you read e-mails, flick through papers on the desk or fuss about with your mobile phone.

Ask questions to make sure you understand what is being discussed and to show you are not just a passive listener. At the right moments, give answers or offer ideas. If certain issues cannot be resolved immediately, outline a course of action.

#### Collaborate

We all have preferred ways of gathering and sharing information. However, to achieve mutually beneficial goals, we all have to adapt as and when necessary. This may mean sharing information more openly than usual, and perhaps involving more people in the decision-making process. Every person on your team should have access to all the information he or she needs.

A sure sign of a poor manager is the habit of hoarding information or disseminating it piecemeal, and then only to key personnel.

A manager should value the chance to collaborate, while realising that certain decisions

must be taken alone. Effective leadership involves reaching consensus, making tough decisions and knowing when to act.

Every top-performing organisation depends on leaders at different levels who know how to run a team. Each team will have its own dynamic as it works towards specific goals.

Successful leaders know that as they rise in an organisation the skills they will need to run ever larger teams will relate more to exerting influence and less to exercising command and control.

Those who excel at team building are usually good communicators and effective motivators. They delegate well, set clear goals and performance expectations, and can judge who works best together to produce results.

To do the same, you could use the following strategies:

#### Determine what motivates

It is not always the money that motivates employees. Some simply enjoy working in a team environment or working independently with minimal supervision. Ask each team member about their motivations and then find projects that allow them to perform at their best. Also, knowing what each person values can help when it comes to thinking of incentives or rewards.

Be careful not to promise more than you can deliver. For example, a staff member may express a wish for a private cubicle or office, but make no commitment unless you are sure you can allow this private space. Also, do not forget intangible rewards. Everyone appreciates a year-end bonus, but public recognition is also a powerful motivator.

#### Set a clear mission

A team mission that is hazy or convoluted could result in total confusion. A mission should be stated in everyday language free of jargon. Also recognise team norms – the accepted ways of behaving and interacting. You can use these to help you lead the team.

#### Hire people who add something

Diversity in terms of personalities and skills is ideally an advantage to an organisation. A team that

functions well is made up of people who can all contribute differently. Analyse your team's goals and identify the knowledge and skills required to achieve them. Be clear about what you expect from your team members.

Identify potential new recruits according to the skills they can bring to the team. Also bear in mind that most employees have some untapped talents.

Do not make the mistake of building teams with people of similar backgrounds and experience. You might need a team of engineers or salespeople, but make sure they are not a team of clones.

#### Deal directly with problems

When an employee fails to perform, there is often no quick and easy way to solve the problem. If the situation is threatening the success of the team, you must speak to the individual concerned and find out what is needed for improvement.

In the more complex cases, seek the advice of the HR department. Do not confront an employee without specific, documented examples of poor performance. Follow procedures established within the company and do not overreact.

#### Empower and delegate

The manager's job is not to maintain the status quo but to develop team members by giving them different projects with increasing responsibility. This entails gauging progress and allowing employees to make suggestions about career development and ways to improve the team.

Too often managers take the easy way out and leave competent staff to go on doing the same job. If individuals are not challenged and allowed to explore new perspectives they will stagnate and the team's performance will suffer.

Make a point of setting milestones and rewarding achievements. These tips should help you build the skills you need to establish strong relationships and lead teams.

Next week we will look at how to get results and adapt to change.

*Contributed by Craig Chappelow and Jean Brittain Leslie of the Center for Creative Leadership, an educational institution dedicated to leadership training and research worldwide*

## HRtrends

# HPH builds on talent to match strategic growth

The ports firm prefers to help existing staff develop the skills it requires rather than hiring new employees

Edith Cormier

**FINDING A BALANCE** between the needs of employees and the needs of a rapidly growing company are critical to business success.

Handling more than half of the Kwai Tsing container port activities, Hutchison Port Holdings (HPH) has been working to find such a balance.

Francis Tong, general manager of human resources for HPH, believes that career management is a joint responsibility; employees must play a role in their own development and, in turn, managers play a key role in supporting employees.

So, how does HPH support employees and its business needs? First, the company sets or reviews the strategic direction to determine the skills required for success. Through discussions with managers, critical areas for training and development are identified for individuals.

Because business is growing rapidly, it is important to identify employees for lateral or promotional development and build talent internally rather than hiring new employees, even if occasionally this means taking bets on people.

"Taking risks on people is not a compromise on quality," Mr Tong said.

Mr Tong passionately believes that the most critical component to employee development is ongoing feedback and support by managers.

"Training and development is well beyond just classrooms," he said.

He admits there are management challenges and he and his staff continue to work with HPH managers to address issues.

Since the business environment is increasingly competitive, it has become vital to focus on people as a resource for growth, and manager awareness is a key component in the employee development process.

To support learning on the job, Mr Tong said managers needed to be trained to appraise people and to provide straight feedback. Providing an employee with positive feedback is better than pointing out required improvements. Mr Tong envisions an environment where employees are groomed and developed as a matter of course, and trainees become a natural part of filling the "pipeline" to address business requirements.

HPH outsources most of its training. With a very small human resource department, the use of external expertise is essential. Mr Tong said external training providers, such as business schools, were valuable because they brought best practices learned from their clients and shared this information.



Francis Tong says staff must be responsible for their own development. Photo: David Wong

## QUICKfixes

### INCENTIVES HELP TO MOTIVATE AND RETAIN SALES STAFF

Talented sales professionals are always in demand, especially when the economy is strong and customers are ready to buy. The latest Hudson report on employment trends shows that 31 per cent of new hiring this quarter will be in sales positions.

Whatever your business, there is fierce competition for talented sales staff. How do you attract and retain the sales staff you need? The most common reason for sales professionals leaving a job is remuneration. But there are other reasons, too.

Poor career prospects cause sales professionals to look elsewhere. This can be difficult to handle as the structure of many sales teams provides only limited opportunities for career advancement.

Work-life balance is a significant issue in many areas, particularly in the financial sector and in industries where staff are asked to work away from Hong Kong for a substantial part of their time.

Management changes, uncertainty about company strategy or even just a change in reporting lines can also be reasons for moving. First, make sure that remuneration meets industry standards. Do benchmarking exercises on salaries and bonuses and use contacts to help you keep abreast of the market.

However, the highly technical aspects of the container operation must be taught by HPH personnel. Employees who complete HPH skills training programmes receive certification for the equipment they operate.

HPH has specifically identified the ability to deal with change and ambiguity, and the development of entrepreneurial capabilities and cultural sensitivity as key for managerial success. To develop these skills, managers participate in an assessment centre where they are evaluated on various competencies.

Managers participate in simulations, role plays and other tests in the evaluation process facilitated by an outside delivery agent. Results are shared with the participants. Also, "on an aggregate level" the feedback is provided to Ivey School of Business which uses the information to develop customised training for the managers.

Senior management understands the development process of their managers because they, too, have been through the process. Overall, Mr Tong said the experience had been very positive for both parties. Managers are able to talk openly to their senior managers about areas which need

#### ROUTE TO SUCCESS

- Take risks to develop employees
- Provide frequent, direct feedback
- Support development opportunities
- Assist development of career paths

improvement and senior managers are able to communicate to their managers the skills they will improve as a result of the feedback.

According to Mr Tong, all managers in the programme receive feedback on their "blind spots" and their career path but it is important they understand that not everyone can be fast tracked through promotions. Sometimes, managers move laterally across business units to develop different management skills. Mr Tong is pleased with the close partnership with the Ivey School of Business and the quality of the customised learning tools Ivey has developed to meet their business requirements.

At HPH, every business unit manager is accountable for a training budget. In addition, there is a corporate HR training budget covering the needs of the whole group. At present, the value of training is measured through occasional surveys. A gap exists as there is no process available yet to formally track employee participation or success in developmental activities on a group-wide basis.

*Article contributed by Kensity Sy on behalf of Hudson, which delivers specialised professional recruiting, outsourcing and human resource solutions worldwide*