



Leading People

4 stories of behaviour change from recent alumni

Story #1: Prioritising people over task

A new, young manager in her 20s responsible for over 50 field staff, including many part-timers and older men – a tough gig for a first-time leader! She reflected that her ‘light bulb moment’ was when she realised that “my job is actually about supporting the people in my team, not the paperwork or stuff like that. It has been a real mindset shift; a new identity almost.” She has now prioritised relationships and people over tasks – for e.g. she now puts her administrative tasks to one side between 4.00 – 5.00pm each day to be ‘present and available’ when her staff come in from the field and they just want to debrief on their day. Previously she just used to get angry and frustrated about them interrupting her!

Story#2: Through changing ourselves we can change others

A mature woman leading a couple of IT-related teams, including some ‘difficult technicians’ that are remotely located and were often disengaged in team meetings. She made a 180-degree shift over a few months. She described herself as a ‘task-focussed fixer’ – the only time she came out of her office was to fix something that was wrong. But she knew something had to change – her confidence was being tested and team performance needed to improve. She realised that she needed to get out of her office and get to know her people better. She made this change quickly – talking to people about what is happening for them, not solely work issues; establishing a wall of gratitude; starting meetings with a discussion of positive achievements. She saw significant changes in the mood of the team and improvements in productivity. One of her key reflections was that “it is interesting to see that through changing ourselves we can also change others”.

Story#3: Pushing people = caring for them

A leader of a small team working in a politically sensitive area in local government that was closely monitored and reactive to operational pressures. She was an experienced manager that cared strongly for her staff. For her, caring about people = not overloading them with work and always being available for them. She came to understand, however, this was detrimental to both her (in terms of stress) and the growth and development of her staff. Her moment of insight was re-defining what caring for her staff meant. She realised that *pushing them* – giving them challenges, growing their skills and experience, holding them accountable – was actually *caring for them*. Or worse, not pushing them = not caring for them. This significant mind-set shift drove her to undertake different behaviours such as setting higher delivery expectations for her staff and allowing herself to not be in the office all the time. She started to see her people rise to the challenge while making her own workload more manageable.

Story #4: Moving from Chief Technician to Leader

A Chief Financial Officer in his late 50s who fits the stereotype of an accountant with a natural inclination to focus on the technical aspects of the role rather than on leading his people. He did, however, want to become a better leader – there were expectations of a new CEO and he was also concerned about the quality of the output from his senior staff. In the past he would have typically questioned their competence and motivation, however he began to wonder how he might have been contributing to the problem – not making it clear what high quality looks like; not understanding them as individuals and what ‘makes them tick’; how he assigns tasks; and not disclosing more of himself. He’s now found himself excited and energized about playing more of a coaching and mentoring role late in his career – building more personal relationships with his team, giving and receiving feedback on a more regular basis, recognizing staff achievements, showing interest in staff welfare and encouraging new ideas. He’s seeing higher levels of enthusiasm in some of his key staff and is now viewed by those staff as ‘a completely different person, much more relaxed’.

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