

Let Your Leaders Lead

We call it the Loose/Tight Principle. That is, you have to decide as a leader what you are going to hold on to loosely and what you are going to hold on to tightly.

For example, you likely want to hold on to your mission tightly. For most organizations, it's not up for debate. When you define your mission and communicate it over and over in many ways, it gives clarity to your direction. You likely have some major values and beliefs that are also tightly held.

On the other hand, there are a lot of things in the loose category. I love to bring great leaders on a team and then free them up to lead. They can make decisions, spend money, set direction, and develop initiatives— all without a huge approval process or a bunch of hoops to jump through to get permission.

In many organizations, problems emerge like this: Perhaps bad hiring decisions are made, so senior leaders jump in and start running things. Then the organization starts to get bottlenecked, and people get frustrated. High-capacity leaders begin to leave the organization. And the senior leader is too busy running things to properly interview potential replacements. So more bad hiring decisions are made. And the cycle continues.

If you want to develop a healthy culture, decide the non-negotiables, bring great people on your team, then get out of the way and watch them do great things.

But even when you hire great people, there is another cycle that can take you down— and that also relates to running things with too heavy a hand. Perhaps you hire a great person. You take the time to ramp her up on values, vision, and the DNA of the organization. (So far, so good.) But then you give that leader responsibility without authority. You let her make all the micro-decisions, but hang on to the big decisions such as setting direction, approving expenditures, or making hiring decisions for her area. The high-capacity leader gets fed up and leaves your team. The leader isn't disloyal; she is just wired by God as a leader and a developer. And you won't let her do either. So now you have to start over looking for a great leader. You spend all your time looking for new staff and restating the values because you don't have any great leaders next to you to help.

Authority is the ability to make decisions without asking someone else's permission. So often we give a leader responsibility (e.g., run the youth ministry or oversee the marketing department) without also giving him the authority. The department leader has to get approval from the senior leader, or the person who says yes or no about expenses, or worse yet, a committee. Nothing frustrates a true leader more than not being able to make decisions, or than making decisions that are later reversed.

How to Free Your Leaders

If you want a great culture in which leaders are excited, then do six simple things:

1. Train them so their blood pulses with the mission, vision, and values of the organization.
2. Set them up to succeed. Lend them your credibility by telling everyone they are the leaders, and they have your full confidence.
3. Give them the authority to make decisions including spending money, hiring and firing staff, and setting direction for their areas.
4. Get out of the way and let them lead.
5. Connect with them continually for evaluation, values review, and rare course corrections. Be available as a sounding board to process decisions. Remember, they don't need you to tell them the answer. Rather, they need you to ask questions and help them process the right course of action.
6. Celebrate their wins publicly, and reward them with greater responsibility as appropriate.

This is easy to put on a list, but much harder to practice. Find a leader you know who is great at empowering and releasing other leaders— and watch him or her closely. Within that leader you will likely find someone who is great at producing a healthy culture.

THINK ABOUT IT

1. Make a list of what is held tightly or loosely in your organization. Are the loose things really loose, or do you sometimes swoop in and micromanage?
2. Do you have leaders to whom you've given responsibility without authority? What can you do to clarify their roles?

Stevens, Tim (2015-01-13). *Fairness Is Overrated: And 51 Other Leadership Principles to Revolutionize Your Workplace* (pp. 117-119). Thomas Nelson.