

Five mistakes to avoid if you're the new leader just taking charge

By Gary Winters

If you've just been appointed the new leader of a team, a department, a division, or perhaps the whole organization, congratulations!. It's an exciting time and can be overwhelming, since you want to put your best foot forward and make your mark. But before you hit that ground running, take a few minutes to consider five classic mistakes that new leaders often make. Make sure you're not one of them.

Mistake #1: Thinking it's about you, when it's really about them.

As you begin your new assignment, it's quite tempting to be seduced by the congratulations, the accolades, and the possibilities. But you must resist the idea that this important event is all about *you*. It's not, at least to your new staff. It's really about *them*. You can bet the house that what's on each of the minds of those people who now report to you is WIIFM – *what's in it for me?*

The truth is, they don't work for you. *You work for them*. Your new team will succeed when you recognize a very important truth: *you need them more than they need you*.

So – think about what you can do to make them successful. To paraphrase President John F. Kennedy, "Ask not what they can do for you. Ask what you can do for your team!"

Mistake #2: Throwing your weight around before throwing your "wait" around.

New leaders can be so enthusiastic about their new authority that they start barking out marching orders – "Do this! Do that!" because, well, they can. They have positional power.

People will do what you tell them to do, because people can be motivated by fear. But not for long.

My advice? *Slow down to go fast*. Take time to get to know your staff, their strengths and weaknesses, and the issues. Spend more time listening than talking. Earn their trust as you begin to share your vision.

Mistake #3: Paying attention to the big picture and ignoring the small stuff.

As you take charge, it's natural to sharpen your focus on the big picture – your vision, where you want to take the team, set some goals and objectives. It's important work and cannot to be overlooked.

But just as important to your team is the so-called small stuff. They want to know how you like to operate. How do you feel about being called after hours? What should someone do if they strongly disagree with a pending decision, or if they feel you are about to make a mistake? How do you like to get information – in person, on the phone, or by email? Is your door always open, or do you prefer people set up appointments to talk to you? Do you have some pet peeves that people should know about?

Everyone has to learn how to work with you. Save them the trial-and-error approach that only reveals your preferences when people guess wrong, and let them know as much of your so-called “small stuff” as quickly as you can.

Mistake #4: Ignoring the power of symbolism.

Make the power of symbolism work for you. When Tom, a new General Manager for a furniture rental company, came on

board, he soon learned that people had been complaining for months about the poor conditions in the employee restroom. Within 24 hours, Tom had it cleaned, repaired and freshly painted. At his first staff meeting he already had them excited to meet a new leader who demonstrated he would listen, he cared, and he would take action. Look for a powerful symbolic act.

Mistake #5: Confusing change with transition.

William Bridges points out in *Managing Transitions* that change is external – it happens *to* you, while transitions are internal – it happens *inside* you. Change starts with a beginning, while transition starts by letting go of the past.

It's easier to get your arms around change than transition, because the latter means helping people acknowledge loss, let go of the way things were, and only then move on. If you ignore the dynamics of transition, you just push behavior underground.

Why else would people spend time at the proverbial water cooler discussing all the changes in the organization?

So even if your arrival is the most exciting event you can remember, pay conscious attention to how people are managing their transition – not just what they say about the change. Help them let go.

To learn more, call 619-497-1937 or email garywinters@cox.net