

Retail Leadership: The Emotional Connection

I was recently reading a new leadership book and while I appreciated the author's simple and easy to understand approach, I was struggling to connect with it. I wanted to give it a fair evaluation so I put it down and picked it up a few times, thinking maybe I just wasn't in the right frame of mind to read a book on leadership. No luck. I fundamentally agree with the author's concept, but something was missing.

I finally realized what's missing from the book. There is a lack of emphasis in this book on the emotional connection between the leader and his or her followers/employees. There are many qualities a leader must have to be effective including vision, passion, and resolve. One quality that is often overlooked, as it is in this book, is the ability to connect with and inspire others. While leaders may ask their followers to follow, (and I'm sorry to say many actually don't ask, but tell,) the choice to follow is strictly the follower's. They may speak of following, but an emotional connection to the leader, not to mention the follower's heart and confidence, will probably not be in the effort. Leaders, and those who aspire to leadership, often don't think about it but following is purely the follower's choice.

So for a leader to succeed in guiding an organization to achieve the vision and strategy the leader has mapped out, he or she must be able to connect with, and inspire the heart of, the people they wish to lead. Without that connection the leader will need to force the followers towards the desired goal, and even then it may be with only marginal success. Many business visions and strategies fail not because they're ill-conceived but from lack of organizational support impacting the execution. Leaders need followers, followers need leaders, and it's the connection between the two that frequently determines success.

How is your leadership ability and your capability to connect with and inspire the heart of your team? Here are five questions to ask yourself:

1. When rallying your team and sharing your vision and strategy, do you speak from your head or your heart? While followers will use the head to process the information that is presented to them, passion comes from the heart. To connect with the heart, we must speak from the heart. Open up. Tell stories that have shaped either this new direction or your own personal convictions. Stories are wonderful ways to motivate and teach others. Sure, there's a lot of information behind your decision, but rarely does information by itself create a connection. If it's passion you want, it's passion you must deliver.
2. Do you speak as a colleague or friend, or do you speak from an authoritarian point of view? Everyone knows you're the boss. You don't need to remind them. Remember, your employees have a choice: to follow you with conviction and purpose, or simply go through the motions. It's not like they're going to stand up and say, "No way buddy. You're a jerk. Lead this!" You may never know until you fail that your team wasn't with you. I know that I'm more likely to follow someone I not only like and respect, but who I believe likes and respects me. Never treat anyone as a subordinate; deal with people as trusted colleagues. Your success depends on it.

3. Do you frequently encourage your staff? When giving them instructions or projects do you tell them that you know they'll do a good job and that they'll be successful? When they fail, do you let them know that it's okay and together, with your help, they'll succeed next time? Do you ask them what they need to be successful? Do you cheer them on when they're down? Do you recognize them when they succeed? Do you let them know that if they've fallen short they're still valuable?
4. Do you show them you care? The old adage that actions speak louder than words is so true when it comes to connecting with and inspiring the hearts of your staff members. Do you recognize accomplishments with notes? A gift? A smile? A heartfelt "Thank You"? Do you celebrate birthdays? Do you recognize their employment anniversary? Do you share in their joys? Their sadness? Do you accommodate them when necessary? Do you help them strike the balance between work and life?
5. Are you teachable? Do you learn from your employees as much as they learn from you? Do you listen more than you speak? Do you ask your employees what they think? Do you care? Leaders are learners. They devour information. They recognize opposing views. They ensure that people in the organization, including those who may not agree with them, are heard, so that together as a group they can move forward.

How good are you at connecting and inspiring the heart of others? What do you think your employees would say if they were asked them the same question? What would they say about your ability to connect with and inspire them? Because ultimately, that's what really matters. Outthinking your competition begins with you, the leader.

About the author: Doug Fleener is a veteran retailer with over 30 years of hands-on retail experience with world-class retailers including Bose Corporation and The Sharper Image. He has also owned and operated his own specialty stores. As the Director of Retail for Bose Corporation, Doug was instrumental in developing the unique and engaging retail methods that have become the industry's benchmarks for experience based retailing and superb customer service.

Doug is now president and managing partner of Dynamic Experiences Group LLC, a Lexington based retail consulting firm dedicated to helping retailers create unique customer experiences that results in higher sales and profits. Learn more at www.dynamicexperiencesgroup.com or call Doug at 866-535-6331.

Fleener also shares his knowledge of experience based retailing in a series of custom key notes and workshops designed for stores, businesses, corporations, non-profits, and trade associations of all sizes. His casual style and quick wit make him not just a crowd pleaser but also an incredible motivator, encouraging people to take action and deliver extraordinary experiences to customers and employees alike. Learn more at www.dougfleener.com.