

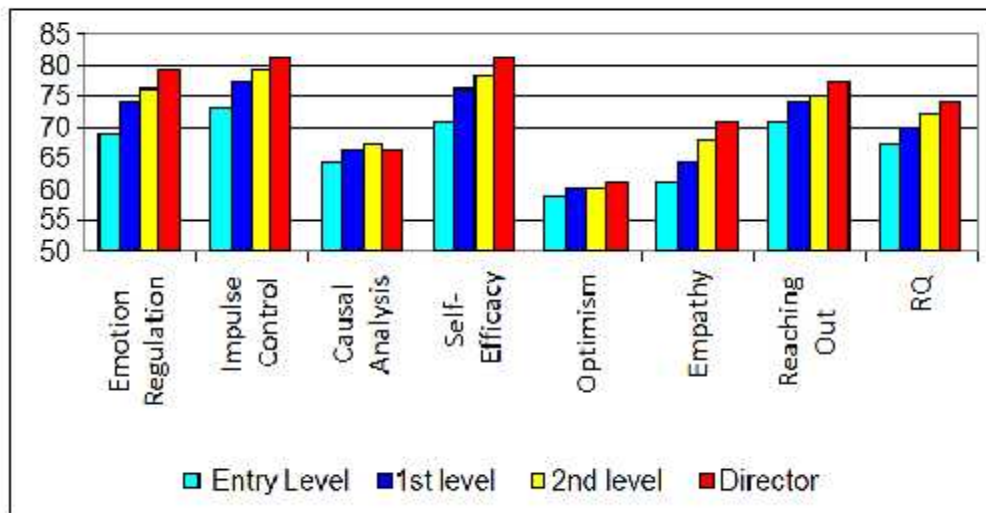
Leading Across The “Optimism & Resilience Gap”

Summary and Tip Sheet

Ever wonder why teams don't seem to be able to handle problems that their leaders find easy to solve? When people are giving excuses for why they can't meet their objectives, why are their leaders scratching their heads trying to figure out why? Chances are, you've run into the 'Optimism & Resilience Gap'. Leading across this gap has become a critical success factor in the 21st century corporate environment. And HR professionals can help their leaders to this more effectively!

The higher you go in an organization, the more resilient and optimistic people tend to be. (See figure below.) This is because resilience and optimism are precisely the qualities that advance careers and get you promoted. But this creates a problem. Optimistic managers and executives are trying to lead their relatively less optimistic – and often pessimistic – staff.

Resilience by level



The result is many lower-level employees perceive their managers to be overly optimistic and unrealistic. They dismiss their directives, goals, and missions as unattainable and so do not work towards achieving them.

The fact is that the very competencies that launch successful people into leadership positions – optimism, accountability and perseverance – may be missing in those they lead, especially as you drill further down in the organization. Reaching across these two very different views of the world to foster optimism, independent thinking, and perseverance, may be the key to achieving superior results in your organization, especially during challenging times.

Human Resource professionals are uniquely positioned – and qualified – to help business leaders communicate more effectively across this resilience and optimism gap. Here are few tips you can offer to help them bridge the gap when the going gets tough:

-) Always remember that your people tend to see the challenges they're facing as relatively permanent. They will not see the path to completion that is so obvious to you. When you present a complex project plan, be sure to break it up into a stepwise process with concrete objectives and milestones. Chunking the task into smaller pieces will increase their level of buy-in.
-) Those you lead will often lack accountability because they fail to see the impact they can have on big, complex issues. The key is to engage in open and honest conversation with them to uncover skepticism, build some enthusiasm and encourage them to take on more responsibility.
-) Look for opportunities to catch your people doing something right. Rewarding the behaviors you're trying to foster will help create permanent positive change. Do this early, and often, throughout the project.

In several Adaptiv workshops, participants expanded on these basic ideas and came up with a number of great ways to have a positive impact. Here they are in no particular order:

-) Try to stay “inquiry-based”. Start with the question instead of telling what you want to do. Ask questions to guide discussion about solutions to problems.
-) Build relationships across departments and down to reports.
-) Thoroughly communicate thoroughly the end result. Paint a clear picture.
-) Don't just give lip service to your direction. Demonstrate your own commitment by your actions.
-) Communicate regularly. Beware of Mind-reading, i.e., expecting your people to know what you're thinking. Be explicit.
-) Serve warm beverages at meetings.
-) Leaders should have good visibility with employees. Manage by wandering around – be seen and be willing to hear direct feedback.
-) Foster an atmosphere in which criticism is welcome; listen to and accept criticism.
-) Let people know your preferred method of communication: email, meetings, phone, etc.

-) Collaborate more. Get input from team members on each project.
-) Spend time with your team members in the trenches to better understand their challenges.
-) Ask questions instead of dictating terms.
-) Try to roll out projects in smaller steps.
-) Explain the “why”. Stress the benefits as they relate to your staff.
-) Recognize and manage perceptions.
-) Be honest.
-) Be direct – get to the point.
-) Listen to what others have to say.
-) Ask for their ideas and be open to shifting your own thinking if their ideas are good ones. Be open to being surprised.
-) Show confidence in your ability to lead.
-) Be flexible.
-) Listen
-) Be aware of your body language, and be sure it demonstrates that you are fully engaged in the conversation.
-) Be humble.
-) Be sure that what you are asking for is realistic. Stretch goals are fine but they must be at least reasonably attainable by the people you are engaging.
-) Spend plenty of time on the purpose and the bigger picture reasons.
-) Help them understand their audience(s)
-) Communicate often and connect to the big picture
-) Provide context

-) Communicate globally and locally – always stressing the “why’s” and the WIIFM’s
-) Be transparent and factual
-) Provide autonomy and engender trust
-) Plan the message
-) Make sure you have the time and willingness to receive feedback when you ask questions. Don’t ask and run.
-) Role play with leader.
-) Help them to feel what their audience may be feeling and do it with conviction
-) Spend more time getting to know your people – their needs, challenges, etc. Manage by wandering around.
-) Recognize the diverse needs of the team you’re communicating to. Different people may need different messaging
-) Encourage leader to seek executive coaching if this is part of a broader opportunity for growth
-) Be honest with your leader. Be willing to risk your own position in the service of open and honest feedback
-) Say “we” are going to do this together
-) Listen – Bring all ideas together to make the organization better
-) Utilize your team members to help you craft the message; be collaborative in this process
-) Engage in face-to-face interaction; don’t rely solely on email
-) Don’t be afraid to show your human side
-) Communicate frequently
-) Identify and measure specific tasks
-) Be positive, but don’t ignore or gloss over the negative