

Avoid Isolation As A New Leader

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Observe/Inquire/Listen

When you first arrive in a new organization stay as open and accessible as you possibly can particularly during the orientation phase (six months minimum). Your primary work as you learn the organization's work and develop trusting relationships will be to observe, listen, and inquire. As a leader you never want to be dependent on a few people who control everything you see and read. In many organizations a few power brokers essentially run the organization and can easily isolate their bosses from any real contact with employees or a true understanding of the current reality. Be aware of staff who repeatedly volunteer for tasks particularly the tasks no one else wants to do. Make note of the people who seem to have excessive workloads or control of information and resources.

Organizational power brokers often have a long history of accumulating responsibility and have a great deal of knowledge. Their knowledge and capacity to deliver often make it difficult not to continue the pattern of dependency. Over dependency on a few employees undermines your capacity to lead and has devastating effects on the performance of the workforce.

Describe the Ideal

If you do not have your own vision for the ideal workplace do some reading and thinking before you arrive. In general healthy workplaces function on the principle of shared power and diversity. Shared responsibility and balanced workloads will result in shared commitment to outcomes and more engagement by everyone. As a leader how you maximize the intellectual capital and the energy of your employees directly effects productivity, creativity and outcomes. Anyone in the workforce who creates over dependency on themselves through withholding knowledge inappropriately or taking on more and more work undermines the capacity of the entire workplace.

Lead System Change

When you recognize a workplace imbalance initiate a review of the individual's workload. A conversation between the supervisor and the employee about how much work is on their plate may warrant a review of their responsibilities by you or by the personnel office (job audit). The review may result in your ability to create a new system of responsibilities and greater balance. As a leader never hesitate to share your philosophy of a healthy workplace describe your desire for shared power and shared responsibility. Coach your supervisors to use these principles when they work with their employees.

An example of what can happen when leaders focus on the behavior of a problem individual and not the system comes from a real life example. A large public organization had a new administrative employee who became the check point for hundreds of emails a day and the gatekeeper for the Senior Executive they supported. After complaints from the workforce involving access, controlling behavior and decision delays some of the administrative assistant's duties were re-assigned into the workload of three other people. After a year the individual was promoted and re-assigned to another division. Within six months the individual's new division found itself in the same predicament with the same individual. The tendency to accept assistance from someone who is competent and consistently volunteers to take on more work can often lead to over dependency and isolation of the leadership.

New technology makes the creation of systems to access diverse sources of information a much easier reality for all leaders. How leaders manage the flow of information and diverse perspectives without becoming overwhelmed is a system design challenge for all leaders.