12 Leadership Best Practices to Improve Your Operations

Ed Rehkopf
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Best Practice #1 – Service-Based Leadership and Employee Empowerment

It has been said that leadership is situational and that there is an optimum style of leadership for every profession – from politician, to general, to doctor, to professor, to club manager. The skills and abilities that make a person successful in one setting do not necessarily translate well to another. The hard-charging, tough-as-nails, cigar-chomping leadership persona of a charismatic military leader will not work well in the mixed gender, multi-ethnic, and transient workforce of the service industry. Unlike a soldier, if a club worker isn’t comfortable with her boss’s leadership, she’ll just go somewhere else.

The very term “service industry” gives hint to the necessary service-based leadership style for club managers where the detail and people-intensive work environment requires open and thorough communication and training, as well as high levels of motivation and morale. Certainly, one cannot expect employees to consistently provide service to a club’s members and guests if they are not properly served by the leadership, example, and support of their bosses.

To be sure everyone understands what we mean by “Service-Based Leadership” here is the description from Leadership on the Line: A Guide for Front Line Supervisors, Business Owners and Emerging Leaders by this author:

“With Service-Based Leadership, the attitude and primary motivation of the leader is service to others – to members, to employees, to shareholders. This approach to leadership naturally creates relationships – the deep and abiding bonds that sustain the efforts of the club. This outward focus of the leader sets up a dynamic where:

- Employees are continually recognized.
- There is an open flow of ideas, opinions, and information.
- Initiative and risk are highly regarded.
- Problem discovery and solution is a focus while placing blame is unimportant.
- Every employee feels energized and part of the team and is valued for his or her contribution.
- Prestige is derived from performance and contribution, not title or position.
- Members are treated well because employees are treated well.
- The energy and initiative of all employees is focused on the common effort.”

The key to serving the needs of your constituencies lies in ensuring that you build strong relationships with individuals. Relationships depend upon how you view yourself in relation to others. If you see yourself as separate and apart from your constituencies, if you view others as the means to your ends, if your vision and goals lack a broader purpose than your own needs and ambitions, establishing meaningful relationships will be impossible. On the other hand,
when you see yourself as part of a team with a shared mission, then a sense of service will be an intrinsic part of your service team relationships.

The great benefit of service-based leadership is that it naturally fosters a sense of employee empowerment. And as John Tschohl, president of the Service Quality Institute says, “Without empowerment, an organization will never be a service leader. Empowerment is the most critical skill an employee can master, and a company can drive in order to lure and keep customers.”

With Service-based Leadership employee empowerment comes naturally, but only if the full management team fully supports and practices this powerful style of leadership (see PCPM, Insights and Ideas, Employee Empowerment – Transforming Your Club’s Service for more details).

**Best Practice #2 − Two Important Leadership Lessons**

When I first joined the military, I was drilled repeatedly that the proper answer for any questioned failure was “No excuse, Sir!” While this response seemed to be a martinet-like reply when being chewed out for poorly shined shoes, an unpolished belt buckle, or for failing to accomplish some impossible tasks, the underlying message was an important one − that there is no excuse for failure.

Properly understood it means that there is always more that I, as a leader, could have done to succeed − I could have paid closer attention, devoted more resources, better juggled the demands upon my time and attention, done a better job of planning or preparing, selected better teammates or subordinates, delegated more or better, supervised closer, or any other more appropriate action or initiative that would have ensured success.

The concept of no excuse for failure is an important one in fighting wars, running companies, or any important or worthwhile endeavor. Further, the concept of no excuses implies that you cannot blame others for your failures − there is always something more you could have done.

The second lesson the military taught is that leaders are responsible for everything their unit does or fails to do. While this lesson is closely tied to “no excuse for failure,” it brings some important distinctions with it − that no matter what role others are supposed to play in the endeavor – it is the leader who is ultimately responsible for the outcome.

Some examples to illustrate the point: Too often, managers wash their hands of personnel issues because they have an HR department. The same is true when the company has a training department or is provided training materials. Suddenly, the manager is no longer responsible for the training outcome because “someone else is responsible for training.” Such attitudes set the manager up for failure.

Remembering that “you can delegate authority, but not responsibility,” managers must take personal responsibility to ensure that not only they are knowledgeable about HR issues and labor laws, but that all subordinate managers are as well. Likewise, managers must be intimately familiar with training materials and whether subordinate managers are properly training front line employees. To do otherwise is to avoid the very responsibilities for which a manager is hired.
While these leadership lessons from the military may seem overly stringent, even harsh, they are, in fact, the essence of leadership – taking personal responsibility. If anyone doubts this, just ask any NFL coach what leadership standard he is held to.

**Best Practice #3 – The Importance of Consistent Club-Wide Leadership**

Management teams can be dysfunctional for a host of reasons, but there is none so basic as a variety of leadership styles. To expect that any group of managers, each with his or her own background, training, and experience, will have a similar and effective leadership style is unrealistic in the extreme.

Yet as with so many other aspects of management, consistency is essential to faithfully communicate and reinforce the club’s culture, service ethic, and environment for employee empowerment. Without leadership consistency, employees get a mixed service message, and their morale and commitment vary from manager to manager and department to department.

Imagine a management team made up of department heads with the following leadership styles:

- **Military** – with its autocratic requirement of absolute, immediate, and unquestioned obedience,
- **Democratic** – where decisions are only made after lengthy discussion and debate,
- **Gunslinger** – with its emphasis on shoot first, aim later,
- **The Buck Stops Elsewhere** – where failures are always blamed on someone else,
- **Absent** – where the leader is never around or is hiding in his office,
- **Aloof** – while he is there, he never interacts with or engages his followers,
- **From another planet**—where the leader expects that everyone will know what to do and will do it without being told,
- **Teed off** – where the manager is angry at everyone all the time,
- **Fear-based** – where the leader rules with an iron hand and scares the heck out of everyone, or
- **Service-based** – where the attitude and primary motivation of the leader is service to others – to members, to employees, to shareholders.

Clearly, such a jumble of leadership styles will lead to a confusing and contradictory example and message for employees, as well as create barriers to cooperation and teamwork between departments.

The solution to such a fragmented workplace is for the general manager to promote a consistent style and application of leadership club wide. This can only be done by providing consistent leadership training to the entire management team. Given the uneven comprehension of leadership issues among any group of managers, the benefits of a uniform understanding and application of leadership will bring club operations to a uniformly high state of performance.
Best Practice #4 – Keeping the Moving Parts of Your Machine Lubricated

At root businesses are pretty much alike and can be compared to a machine. They have many moving parts: products and services to sell, people to hire and manage, facilities to maintain and clean, financial transactions to account for and report, risks to manage, vendor relationships to establish and maintain, and customers to attract and retain.

The only real difference among businesses is their size and complexity. The bigger they are, the more complex they are, the more employees they have, and the more moving parts there are in their machine.

As with any large, complex piece of machinery with many moving parts, it must be well-lubricated to reduce friction and function properly.

In the case of businesses, particularly in the service sector, the moving parts are employees. Unless they understand and properly execute their function and purpose, unless they mesh well with other employees who also understand their function and purpose, there is friction. And without the daily application of the oil of leadership by your constant example, continual communication, and timely direction, the machine grinds along, crippled by the friction between its moving parts.

Bottom Line: People can be your greatest asset, but also your greatest problem. The difference is the leadership you apply daily to your moving parts. Service-Based Leadership when conscientiously and consistently applied will reduce, if not eliminate, the continual friction found in many organizations.

Best Practice #5 – Breaking Down Your Club’s Silos

Teamwork is important in business where complex organizations depend upon the strengths of different departments working together. The term “silo” has come to represent individual managers and departments focused solely on their own agendas, functions, and tasks.

The danger in having silos in your club is that some managers have little understanding beyond a broad conception of what other managers or their departments do. Without a keener appreciation of all elements of the club’s operations, how can department heads work together as a team to understand and exceed members’ expectations?

So how does a general manager go about breaking down the silos of a club? Here are some suggestions:

- Hold regularly scheduled weekly meetings with all department heads. These meetings allow each attendee to update others on what they are working on. Obviously, this keeps everyone better informed and gives each a better understanding of what others do.

- Use the annual club planning process as a team building exercise. Multiple minds are better than one and often an outside view on problems can bring a fresh approach.
Once a month have one department head lead a brainstorming session to improve his or her operation (see PCPM, Insights and Ideas, Continual Process Improvement – An Essential Discipline of Successful Clubs to see how it works).

Take department heads to lunch at a nice restaurant once a quarter for socializing. Follow the lunch with a brief presentation and Q&A session by a community or business leader. Often these individuals can come from the club’s membership and would be happy, maybe even honored, to speak to their club’s leadership.

Hold “Wow Factor” brainstorming sessions with all department heads (see PCPM, Insights and Ideas, Wow Factors – What Have You Done for Me Lately? for information).

The Bottom Line: The more your department heads interact with one another in formal and informal settings, the better they will understand the common challenges they face in running a high quality, member-focused club. When this happens, they will naturally begin functioning as a team committed to their common purpose regardless of individual function.

Best Practice #6 – Setting the Example

“Setting an example is not the main means of influencing another, it is the only means.”

Albert Einstein

In what ways do you influence your employees regarding …?

- Personal conduct
- Integrity
- Productivity
- Common decency
- Service to others
- Attitude towards members, the club, and their jobs
- Taking responsibility and initiative
- Solving problems instead of complaining
- Watching the pennies of the business
- Caring for the club’s furniture, fixtures, and equipment
- Good organization and efficiency
- Sharing praise and shouldering blame
- Being a “stand up” person
- Looking out for others

Don’t expect your employees to be the kind of person you aren’t or do the things you don’t do. Your work team is a reflection of you. If it’s not performing well, you have no one to blame but yourself.
Best Practice #7 – Painting the Vision

As a leader you must have a vision of what you are trying to achieve with your operation. If you have no vision of what you want your operation to be, how it is to function, or what quality of work your employees will produce, you are merely maintaining the status quo and are providing little value to your club.

Vision is useless if not shared. Talk about it day in and day out. Vision should be so ingrained in the work lives of your employees that it is constantly on their minds. When it is, all their abilities and efforts are directed by and toward it.

Best Practice #8 – Closure on Issues

Solving problems is a major function of leaders. Every day new problems crop up and, if not addressed, threaten the smooth functioning of the club. Simply talking about problems doesn't solve them. If so, complaining would be a highly valued professional skill.

Leaders must prioritize problems, addressing the more significant ones first. To solve a problem, the causes and underlying issues must be sought out, alternative solutions explored, discussions with other affected departments held, and finally a DECISION MUST BE MADE. Even then, the solution is not complete until employees have been informed of the decision and changes have been completely implemented.

No matter what problems or issues are raised, employees deserve a response. Closure is often a simple matter of getting back to them to let them know that their concerns will be addressed. Even if you decide not to act, you owe it to them to let them know that decision. If you don't, they have no way of knowing whether you forgot or you don't care.

Best Practice #9 – Consequences

Always keep in mind the consequences of your own behavior as a leader:

- If you are not loyal to your employees, they will not be loyal to you.
- If you do not respect your employees, they will respond in kind.
- If you don’t care about your employees, they won’t care about you or your endeavors.
- If you don’t look out for their interests, they won’t look out for yours.
- If you don’t treat your employees with respect, they will not treat you or your members with respect.
- If you are abusive to employees, the good ones will leave; only the poor ones will stay.

Providing service is all about attitude; treating employees badly fosters bad attitudes. Your example sets the standard for all your employees. Don’t blame them if they don’t have high standards.
Best Practice #10 – Handshakes and High Fives

A simple yet effective way of cementing work relationships is to shake employees’ hands. Politicians understand the value of “pressing the flesh.” A variation on this traditional practice is the “high five” used by athletes. Psychologically, this touching of others establishes contact and rapport. While gratuitously touching employees is inappropriate, the handshake is an accepted sign of recognition and respect.

A hearty handshake of greeting each day, as well as using the opportunity at the end of the work shift to thank employees for their efforts, is a marvelously simple way of establishing a bond with your employees. As with any other symbol of relationship, the handshake must be sincere, open, and direct. There can be no question of ulterior motive, only good fellowship and cheer. Phoniness is evident to everyone.

Best Practice #11 – Giving Thanks

Say thank you to your employees on a regular basis. Nothing could be simpler or more profound in its impact on staff morale, because so few managers do it.

“Thanks for your help today,” “I really appreciate your efforts on this project,” “I realize how difficult this assignment was, and am most appreciative of your help,” “I couldn’t have done it without you,” “You did a great job.” – any of these expressions of appreciation, when sincerely given, will have a stunning impact on your service team.

Best Practice #12 – Give Them More than Just a Paycheck

Throughout my career I’ve too often heard managers complain about the labor pool, the lack of work ethic and sense of responsibility among workers, and the constant headaches that came from their human “resources.” The overwhelming sense from these managers was, “We pay too much to these people whose only interest is in collecting a paycheck.”

Yet at the same time and in the same or similar markets, there were other managers who did just fine in finding and retaining good people who made a real contribution to their organizations. What then made the difference? The answer is quite simple – good leadership!

So instead of providing your employees with just a paycheck consider giving them:

- **Respect.** The life of all human beings is important to themselves, yet too many people are treated by their bosses as if they didn’t matter. This maltreatment is not necessarily by design; it’s the byproduct of busy bosses too focused on themselves or the many problems they face in busy operations. But every employee deserves to be treated with the utmost respect and the common courtesies of human interaction. When consistently and sincerely given, this respect will transform any work team.

- **Responsibility.** Placing responsibility on your work team demonstrates your trust in them. Trust given returns trust. In contrast, when you treat your employees like idiots or children, many will respond by acting like idiots or children.

- **Recognition.** Every day your employees do hundreds of things right. Make sure you recognize that essential contribution to the success of your operation. When sincerely
given, a simple thank you or handshake of appreciation has a profound impact on morale, commitment, and contribution.

- **Engagement.** Leaders must engage with their employees every day and respond to their issues and concerns. In any group of people working in a complex, fast-paced, and detail-intensive business there will be conflict and turmoil. Without the leader’s guiding hand, this turmoil can consume the operation. Leaders must stay engaged, be approachable, and respond to concerns.

- **Example.** Someone once said, "A leader leads by example, whether he intends to or not." The leader’s example is paramount in setting the standards of the operation. If the leader doesn’t seem to care about his employees, they won’t care about him or his initiatives and agenda.

- **Training.** Most people want to do a good job and appreciate when they are properly trained to improve their knowledge, skills, and job performance. Lack of training leads to a chaotic and confusing work environment, the loss of conscientious employees, and a staff dominated by people who “couldn’t care less.”

- **Removal of Roadblocks.** Leaders should be hyper-sensitive to anything in the workplace that inhibits efficiency. Do whatever is necessary within reason to identify and eliminate anything that makes employees jobs more challenging, time consuming, and frustrating. Not only do you gain speed, efficiency, and improved productivity, but your employees will understand that you are dedicated to improving the operation and you care enough about them to address legitimate concerns.

All the above steps from leaders will have a dramatic effect on employees and the operation. In contrast, when you give your employees no more than a paycheck, you shortchange them, the organization, and your members.

**Learn more**

About the Author

Ed Rehkopf is a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy and received a Master of Professional Studies degree in Hospitality Management from Cornell’s School of Hotel Administration. During his long and varied career, he has managed two historic hotels, managed at a four-star desert resort, directed operations for a regional hotel chain, opened two golf and country clubs, worked in golf course development, and launched a portal web site for the club industry.