

How to Become a Leader Others Will Want to Follow

Imagine she's sitting across the desk from you with her forehead furrowed and her eyes narrowing. The pause becomes uncomfortable, even awkward. She's agitated, but you can tell she wants to say something. Again, you softly ask, "Ally, you had so much potential. Why are you leaving?"

Breaking the silence, she blurts out, "I didn't feel valued."

You drop your chin in disbelief.

Something must have gone wrong over the past year. Ally was a promising new associate in your company. She was a marketing major with stellar grades, glowing enthusiasm, a strong work ethic, and raving references. You thought she could quickly move up the ranks and make a positive impact on your business. The cream rose to the top, and she became your top performer.

But slowly Ally became distant, and her work quality deteriorated. She began making incorrect inventory replenishment orders, losing patience with customers, and even verging on rudeness. She started missing shifts. The passion and energy you observed in her early days was gone. She was just punching the clock, and her teammates knew it.

As the business owner, you need to get to the bottom of it.

You look Ally in the eye and ask, "Why didn't you feel valued?"

"Where do I begin?" she sarcastically replies, then replays several circumstances that led to her decision to leave.

"My relationship with Karen, the store manager, was great the first few months but rapidly turned for the worse. It all started one day as we were closing for the night. Counting the

cash register, I came up \$159 short—an honest mistake. But Karen blamed me and deducted the money from my paycheck. I felt demoralized.”

“I offered ideas on how to merchandise books differently, but Karen discounted my suggestions and said, ‘We’ve always done it this way.’ She never listened to me.”

“Once, a customer became belligerent with me as I was trying to help. Karen interfered, took the customer’s side, and blamed me in front of all the other customers standing in line.”

“When I did a good job, like when I was the number-one salesperson of the month, Karen never recognized my accomplishment. I’d ask her for performance feedback, but none was given. When I made a mistake with a book inventory order, Karen asked, ‘How could you be so stupid?’”

“All this, and you wonder why I’m leaving? All I wanted was to be valued—treated with dignity and respect.”

To make a long story short, Ally leaves your organization, and you are faced with a challenge. Ally’s not the first employee over the past few years to leave. The common thread is Karen. How do you help Karen, one of your best-performing managers, improve her leadership skills? And even more importantly, how do you build a culture where highly talented individuals want to work with your company and become loyal, productive, results-oriented teammates?

The answer lies in **engagement**. When you think of *engagement*, perhaps you think of a state of premarriage, being in gear, or a hostile military encounter. But from a business perspective, engagement means the emotional connection someone has to their work and the level of discretionary effort they put forth based on their relationship with their direct

manager. Engaged associates are highly involved, enthusiastic, and committed to their work. An engaged culture results in lower absenteeism, turnover, and shrinkage, and higher customer ratings, productivity, sales, and profits. The opposite is true for unengaged or actively disengaged associates—those who don't care about their work or are resentful that their needs aren't being met will intentionally undermine the organization. Hence, the greater the engagement, the greater the business results, and vice versa. Bottom line is, engagement matters.

But how do you develop engaging leaders and build an engaged culture? It starts with you. Decide to become a leader that others want to follow. Lead by example and instill leadership qualities in others.

Here are five ways to do just that:

1. **Build trust.** Be real with people. Be who you say you are. Do what you say you'll do. Let them know your values and what you stand for. Risk vulnerability with others, and they will reciprocate. When you build trust by example, you create an environment where people feel safe, failure and learnings are valued, opinions and ideas are openly shared, and team members must rely on one another.
2. **Cast a vision.** Frequently point to how people's work ties into what the organization is accomplishing. Enable them to see how their role positively contributes to the greater good to help them find meaning in their work.
3. **Cultivate empathy.** Ask questions, actively listen, reserve judgment when others are speaking, and validate their emotions. People will care how much you know when they know how much you care.
4. **Express appreciation.** Inspire confidence in others by encouraging them and frequently celebrating their contribution to the team. Make recognition part of your regular agenda.

5. **Amplify others.** Give people big projects or problems to solve. Help them build on their strengths and eliminate blind spots. Teach them how to overcome the fear of failure. Help them reach their potential through coaching and mentoring. Provide daily feedback framed with the intent to develop. Regarding feedback, celebrate in public but always correct in private.

From a biblical perspective, building trust, casting vision, cultivating empathy, expressing appreciation, and amplifying others are all about the Golden Rule. As Jesus taught his disciples, "Here is a simple, rule-of-thumb guide for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then grab the initiative and do it for them. Add up God's Law and Prophets and this is what you get" (Matthew 7:12 MSG). To become a leader others want to follow and build an engaged culture, you must take the initiative. It begins with you. If you apply these five steps, you will create a thriving organization and avoid circumstances like those Ally experienced.

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Thanks for reading and take care!

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