

Creating a Winning Environment - Part One

by Dr. John C. Maxwell

The environment has taken center stage recently in the American media. Going "green" has become trendy among everyone from Hollywood elites to suburbanites. Corporate America is experiencing pressure from environmentally savvy consumers who are flocking en masse to socially responsible companies. At a time when the USA is at war, an American, Al Gore, was awarded with the Nobel Peace Prize for his persistent advocacy of the environment. Whether the discussion involves global warming, renewable energy, or organic agriculture, seemingly everywhere environmental issues are at the forefront of debate.

Perhaps "environment" should be the word at the center of leadership conversations as well. Consciously or unconsciously, leaders cultivate the environment in their workplaces. Some are lush climates where leaders flourish and thrive, while others are toxic environments where leaders either leave or wither from the pollution. In each of the next two editions of Leadership Wired, we'll pose five questions about the environment you're creating as a leader. My goal is to help you nurture a winning environment in your organization.

The Growth Environment

Growth is the yardstick by which you can measure the well-being of your organization's environment. A healthy climate is conducive to growth, and functions as an incubator where leaders are birthed and developed. The following qualities characterize a growth environment:

1. Others are ahead of you.
2. Your focus is forward.
3. The atmosphere is affirming.
4. You are often outside of your comfort zone.
5. Failure is not your enemy.
6. Others are growing.
7. People desire change.
8. Growth is modeled and expected.

To gauge your success in setting the climate of your organization, monitor your people to see whether or not they're growing.

Questions That Create a Winning Environment

1. "Do I understand what it takes to be a team?"

Without effective teamwork, an environment is doomed to fail. A collection of individual contributions will never compare to the synergy of a cohesive team. A successful team displays:

- Tolerance of one another's weaknesses.
- Encouragement of each other's efforts.
- Acknowledgement that every person has something to offer.
- Mindfulness of how each person depends on the others for success.

As Mother Teresa was fond of saying, "You can do what I cannot do, I can do what you cannot do, and together we can do great things."

2. "Are my expectations crystal clear?"

We all deal with the impact of expectations in 3 dimensions:

1. Expectations we have for ourselves.
2. Expectations we have of others.
3. Expectations others have of us.

Leaders clarify expectations in every dimension, and they frequently revisit them to make adjustments or to realign team members to the expectations.

3. "Do my people understand why what we do is important?"

In any environment, workers can lose focus of how their task relates to the big picture. Leaders connect activities to the purposes behind them by bridging "what" and "why". They do so by exposing team members to the end results of their labor, by expressing gratitude for their work, and by explaining how each job is relevant to the company as a whole.

4. "Does my team define success with their customer?"

In an optimal environment, every person is pulling in the same direction toward a common goal of serving the customer. From the sales team to the accounting office, no one should be in the dark when it comes to understanding customer needs and figuring out how to exceed them.

Before I speak to an organization, I ask questions to uncover their motivation for bringing me in as a featured guest. The organization's response helps me tailor my presentation so that they receive maximum value from me. Afterward, I follow up by asking if I met their expectations. Doing so gives me feedback while also demonstrating my commitment to serving them.

5. "Am I holding people accountable for performance?"

In the work environment, what doesn't get inspected, won't be respected. If there's no accountability in an area, then there's no incentive to perform with excellence in it. It's incumbent upon a leader to design scorecards and benchmarks to evaluate performance.

Accountability starts with a look in the mirror. Workers are unsuccessful for three main reasons, and in each case, leadership may have set the stage for failure.

Root Causes of Poor Performance

Inadequate Training
Lack of Capacity
Bad Attitude

Leadership Responsibility

Proper Equipping
Picking the right people for the job
Modeling confidence and optimism

Before blaming or disciplining their people, leaders should first scrutinize their performance of personal responsibilities.

Review

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1. "Do I understand what it takes to be a team?"
2. "Are my expectations crystal clear?"
3. "Do my people understand why what we do is important?"
4. "Does my team define success with their customer?"
5. "Am I holding people accountable for their performance?"