

# Creating a Winning Environment - Part Two

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.

The California wildfires of October 2007 were stark reminders of the horror that can be unleashed when the environment turns hostile. The cluster of fires were fanned by the Santa Ana winds which swept westward across the California deserts and out to sea. The hot and dry winds gusted up to 100 mph in places, and, for days, they made firefighting next to impossible.

The rapidly advancing fires charred and blackened everything in their paths. Thousands had to flee their homes to escape the fires as blazes raged uncontrollably across the southern portion of the state. By the time the fires subsided, over a half-million acres had gone up in flames, 1,600 houses had burned down, and well over \$1 billion of damage had been done. The tragic effects of the widespread fires will be felt in California for months, if not years.

As evidenced by California's wildfires, when the natural environment goes haywire, everyone living within it suffers. Likewise, when leaders lose control of their environment, everyone within the organization undergoes harm. It's critical for leaders to stay abreast of environmental factors in order to protect a healthy and secure workplace.

Last edition of Leadership Wired, we looked at five questions leaders ask to create a winning environment. In this lesson, we'll pick up where we left off by exploring five more questions posed by leaders concerned about the climates they are orchestrating.

## Questions That Create a Winning Environment

6. "Do I seek out barriers and remove them to make the team's job easier?"

Trailblazers remove tree limbs, boulders, and overgrowth so that future travelers may safely navigate a path through the wilderness. Leaders are trailblazers. They go ahead of the pack to scout out barriers to progress. When they find a road block, they remove it from the environment. When they discover a pitfall, they carefully mark it, and redirect the trail around the hazard.

Leaders should be on the lookout for specific environmental hazards. These include the following:

1. Lack of communication.
2. Formation of silos and cliques.
3. Distrust among team members.
4. Bad attitudes.
5. Inexplicable underperformance.
6. Unwillingness to change.

Any of the aforementioned landmines, if not unearthed, can blow apart a health team. Leaders have the duty of identifying and removing landmines before they wreak destruction.

7. "Do I give people the freedom required to learn, grow, and deliver?"

As I wrote in *The Law of Empowerment*, "Only secure leaders give power to others." If a leader doesn't know his own strengths/weaknesses, he will not hand off responsibilities to his team. If a leader doesn't know his team's strengths/weaknesses, he cannot hand off responsibilities to his team.

8. "Do I foster a culture of inclusion by hiring people who are different than I am?"

To a degree, we are all prisoners of our own perspectives. Trapped in the grid of our experiences and background, we are limited in our ability to see the world clearly. As a result, we must be purposeful in nurturing an environment of diversity. A collection of viewpoints is the only way to offset biases and blind spots.

Within an organization, a few qualities must be homogenous—held in common by all. These are values, vision, and commitment to the team. However, in most areas, hiring for diversity is the wisest course of action. The strongest environments are inhabited by leaders with varied expertise, experiences, backgrounds, and temperaments.

9. "Am I a consensus builder?"

Team leaders genuinely believe that they do not have all the answers, consequently, they do not insist on providing them. They believe they do not need to make all key decisions—so they do not. They believe they cannot succeed without the combined contributions of all the other members of the team—so they avoid any action that might constrain input or intimidate anyone on the team. Ego is not their predominant concern.

10. "Have I created a caring environment among team members?"

When molding a collection of individuals into a team, a leader should endeavor to promote an environment of mutual care and concern. An illustration from an elementary school classroom explains this concept better than I could ever hope to do.

Mr. Alter's fifth-grade class at Lake Elementary School made headlines when the boys in the class decided by themselves to shave their heads. They did so, without embarrassment, because one of their own, Ian O'Gorman, developed cancer and had undergone chemotherapy. His hair began to fall out. To make their friend feel at home, all of his classmates agreed to shave their heads (with their parents' permission) so that upon his return, Ian would not stand out from the class. That way, no one would know who the "cancer kid" was. The teacher, Mr. Alter, was so moved by the spirit of his class that he too shaved his head.

Through the experience, Mr. Alter's class leaped the chasm of friendship and became the caring environment of a family.

## Summary

Leaders orchestrate environments, environments impact behaviors, and behaviors determine the fate of the organization. Over the past two editions of LW, we've looked at 10 questions leaders ask to create a winning environment. Here's a recap:

- \* "Do I understand what it takes to be a team?"
- \* "Are my expectations crystal clear?"
- \* "Do my people understand why what we do is important?"
- \* "Does my team define success with their customer?"
- \* "Am I holding people accountable for their performance?"
- \* "Do I seek out barriers and remove them to make the team's job easier?"
- \* "Do I give people the freedom required to learn, grow, and deliver?"
- \* "Do I foster a culture of inclusion by hiring people who are different than I am?"
- \* "Am I a consensus builder?"
- \* "Have I created a caring environment among team members?"