5 Leadership Lessons You Won't Learn in B-School

Forget vision, passion, and other B-school platitudes. After all, "Inspire your team" is great advice, but how do you pull that off? Jeff Haden who learned much of what he knows about business as he advanced in the manufacturing industry from forklift driver to operations manager believes most of what people know about leadership didn't come from business schools or conferences or seminars. In an Inc. online post, he offers lessons learned the hard way that are more than just writings on the wall.

1. Data comes and goes, but feelings last forever.
Facts and figures are important. Explaining the logic and reasoning behind a decision can help create buy-in and commitment. Charts, graphs and tables are useful--and quickly forgotten. But talk down to an employee or embarrass him in front of other people and he will never forget. Spend twice the time thinking about how employees will feel than you do thinking about data and logic. Correcting a data mistake is easy. Overcoming damage you cause--whether intentional or not--to an employee's self-esteem is impossible.

2. Great ideas are never found in presentations.
Presentations are a great way to share detailed and complex information. Presentations are a terrible way to share great ideas. Great ideas can be captured in one or two sentences. Your employees have those ideas. All you have to do is listen.

3. The "volunteer penalty" kills the flow of great ideas.
Your best employees tend to come up with the best ideas. It's natural to assign responsibility for carrying out an idea to the person who came up with the idea. Of course, your best employees are already working extremely hard, so assigning them responsibility every time they have a suggestion naturally stops their flow of ideas. Sometimes the employee will welcome the responsibility for carrying out their idea. Other times they won't. How do you know which way a particular employee will respond? Ask.

4. Sharing only the positive always results in a negative.
Imagine you're sharing the reasoning behind a decision with your team. Naturally, you describe the positive outcomes of the decision. Meanwhile your employees are instinctively looking for negatives, since almost every silver lining for the business has a black cloud for at least a few employees. Never leave out the negatives, even if those negatives may be potential rather than actual. Talk openly about any downsides, especially when those downsides directly affect employees. Show you understand the best *and* the worst that can happen and what that might mean to your team. When you freely discuss potential negatives, employees not only respect you more, they often work harder to make sure those potential negatives don't occur.

5. Data is accurate, but people are right.
You're smart. You're talented. You're educated. Data analysis is your best friend. Sometimes your data will lead to an inescapable conclusion, and yet you should still make a different decision. Sometimes a decision should be based on more than analysis, logic, and reasoning. No decision should ever be made in a vacuum, because a decision must eventually be carried out by people. Leadership should be data driven, but great leadership is often subjective and even messy. If your employees don't agree with you, ask why, but don't ask just so you can defend your position. Ask to learn. You know things your employees don't know, and they know things you don't know--until you listen to what they say.