



Functional Leadership and The Elusive “How” – Dr. Sarah Spradlin, DBA

FUNCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

Lately, I have read a lot of articles that proclaim the positive role "functional leadership" plays in organizational development. Although I fundamentally agree with the authors, I'd like to pragmatically address some of the rhetoric. First and foremost, there is no such thing as a functional leader. Functional leadership is not a collection of traits that characterize an individual. Rather, it is a model or process that focuses on how leadership occurs within an organization. Likewise, the basic definition of functional is nothing more than the manner in which something operates.

Therefore, the term functional is not inter-changeable with that of effective. In other words, functional leadership does not equate to effective leadership. Semantics aside, when implemented as part of the collective processes functional leadership can prove to be a very effective tool in advancing organizational development.

Now take it a step further...for the sake of argument let's peel back the onion a little more on functional leadership. What is functional leadership? Theoretically, functional leadership is a model that focuses on how leadership occurs within an organization. Likewise, functional leadership is grounded in the notion that leadership does not rest with one person but rests on a set of behaviors by the group that gets things done. Any member of the group can perform these behaviors, so any member can participate in leadership. Essentially, the leader has implemented a process defined by employee empowerment by which employees collectively perform the behaviors necessary to accomplish the mission. Ideally, by implementing this process, the leader is now in a position to focus on the strategic requirements external influencing the organization and the organization begins to adapt and advance regardless of change. This is a great philosophy and again, the functional leadership model can prove very effective towards advancing organizational development... However, for the functional leadership model to be effective, the leader assumes autonomy is bestowed upon a fundamentally competent workforce capable of exploiting core competencies required to successfully execute complex behaviors. If the workforce is not capable of successfully executing complex behaviors then a functional leadership model will not be effective, and the result will be perpetual mediocrity at best.

THE ELUSIVE "HOW"

The question is - How do you grow a fundamentally competent workforce whereby individual employees are capable of exploiting core competencies required to successfully execute complex behaviors?

The answer is - You recruit, hire, develop, and promote an emotionally intelligent workforce. In doing so, you build the foundation of individual resilience whereby individual employees are capable of successfully executing the complex behaviors for functional leadership to be effective. Emotional Intelligence (EI) is not about emotions. Rather, EI is recognized as a set of interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies that are used by individuals to identify, assess, understand, and manage one's own emotions, as well as the emotions of others.

"If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle." - Sun Tzu, Art of War

Likewise, **EI competencies can be objectively measured and developed.** EI is associated with a myriad of individual performance outcomes such as: transformational leadership, strategic decision making, strong coping and stress management skills, effective communication and conflict management, and resilience. Additionally, EI has shown to positively correlate with numerous organizational performance outcomes to include: employee job satisfaction and job performance, improved team dynamics, leader-member exchange, and customer loyalty. Furthermore, as EI has shown to be a strong predictor of future performance, EI is considered to be an equal if not greater indicator of one's personal and professional success. Furthermore, research has identified EI as playing a critical role in predicting human performance outcomes across a wide spectrum of academic, corporate, and government sectors including military special operations.

CONSIDER THIS

As a leader you identify a requirement to improve effective communication among your workforce. How do you meet this requirement? Maybe you re-align your organizational structure and streamline your information management process. Meanwhile, you provide workforce training to introduce the new processes and targets effective communication. At the end of the day and after many resources have been exhausted, you expect to see improvement in communications.

Maybe - But what if the majority of your employees struggle with the fundamental competencies required to effectively communicate such as assertiveness, self-expression, impulse control, or reality testing? How can you expect your employees to build upon the fundamentals if the fundamentals are lacking? It's like putting your socks on over your shoes; your shoes just won't function effectively. Far too many organizational and leadership development companies either fail to integrate EI as part of the collective model for change or attempt to use EI as an "add-on" technique. This approach is backwards, and it just won't work. EI is the foundation to build complex behaviors and support process improvement initiatives like functional leadership. EI training must be integrated at the onset of professional development in order to accurately balance EI competencies and effectively develop performance outcomes that help develop a resilient workforce.

FINAL THOUGHT

For all you "functional leaders" out there...If you're doing it backwards, I challenge you to wear your socks on over your shoes tomorrow. Then, when it starts raining, we'll see how well your socks adapt to adversity in a changing environment.