Why and How to Uncover What Team Members Say About Their Leaders

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Effective teamwork is paramount in a medical practice. The foundation for great teamwork, according to research, is the mutual trust and understanding of work tasks between the team leader and each team member. These qualities can be developed through thoughtful application of five leader behaviors: inclusion, modeling, improvement, rewarding, and respecting. Medical practice leaders can learn these behaviors much as any habit can be formed. This article discusses why this is important and how to implement a self-directed leadership improvement program for better organizational outcomes.

KEY WORDS: Employee motivation; leadership; behavior; development; leader–member exchange.

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Research has shown that it is very difficult to get honest opinions from team members about their team leaders. Research also has shown that honest team member opinions are powerful tools for leadership improvement. For example, a strong leader surveys team members about how they feel about their leader's actions and then uses this information to modify his or her leadership style to better meet the team's needs. This sounds great, but it depends on describing their existing leadership styles—information elicited mainly through surveying team members. Honest answers are critical—dishonest answers are the fodder for "garbage in, garbage out" problems. An additional problem arises if the information gathered isn't the right or complete information. Again, the result can be dissatisfying.

Leaders in medical offices need to know what their team members think about them. The relationship between a team leader and a team member is described by mutual trust and agreement on the work tasks. Knowing what a team member feels about the leader's actions is useful in improving the leader's relationship with each team member. However, obtaining this knowledge usually requires that a trusting relationship between the leader and each team member has already been established. This presents quite a conundrum: how does a leader get to the truth? The two issues for leaders are: (1) getting the correct information; and (2) what to do with that information. This article explores both of these issues so medical practice leaders can find and use honest answers to the question, "What do my team members think of me?"

OBTAINING THE CORRECT INFORMATION

It is crucial to base leadership development on correct information. "Correct" in this case means honest answers to the right questions. The "rightness" of the questions is directly related to what information is needed to meet the leader development goals. Obtaining the correct information starts with defining the goals of the project. For this article, the goal is to determine the state of the work relationship between the leader and each team member. The answers identify areas of leader strength and weakness. The knowledge obtained is used for leadership improvement.

What aspects of the relationship are important to understand? The relationship is the agreement between a team leader and team member regarding how to accomplish the work that needs to be done. The leader has work that has to get done—for example, scheduling and resourcing for procedures—and the leader relies on each team member as a human resource to complete those tasks effectively and efficiently. The team member relies on the leader to provide the resources required to get the work done. A brand-new team member may have an ill-defined agreement with the team leader, making management controls by the leader necessary to ensure accuracy and timeliness. Double-checking the member output is an example of such a control. Double-checking the leader input is another control. Management works both ways.

As the leader and team member work together, an understanding is reached and matures as to what the leader

will provide and what the member will accomplish. This includes how the resources are provided, how the work gets done, and the rewards for the member. This negotiation often takes place implicitly, but there can be explicit developmental points. Academics refer to this negotiation as the development process for the social-exchange relationship between the two parties. There is a large body of research supporting the key role the leader-member exchange relationship (LMX) quality has in relation to organizational outcomes: higher-quality LMX relationships produce better outcomes.

A leadership development program can use the LMX quality measurement as the basis for improving leadership.[1] LMX quality is determined via published surveys such as LMX-7, which is specifically designed for this purpose and tested for accuracy. These instruments provide results on a scale of low to high regarding the quality of the LMX relationship between a team leader and a team member. Keep in mind that these measures report a specific state of a particular type of relationship between leader and member. This is not about whether they like each other; it is about how much they have agreed on and how much trust they have in each other to honor that agreement about their work. That is what needs to be known if a leader is trying to be the best they can for their team member. Armed with that knowledge, the leader can use many tactics to improve the relationship such as spending more one-on-one time with the team member, asking their opinion about their work, providing improvement opportunities, fine-tuning rewards to best meet their needs, and so on.

But how do you get honest answers to these surveys?

- First, the surveys are not about opinions; they ask about observations, which is less threatening.
- Second, these surveys are not intrusive, because the observations asked for are about everyday leadership behaviors.
- Third, the surveys have to be anonymous. It has to be absolutely clear to the participant that there is no individually identifiable information. A recent criticism of online surveys is the possibility of tracking the responses back to the individual's computer, so it is suggested by our company, Five Star Leadership, that a single computer be used for everyone taking the survey.

One challenge, though, even if the survey is done online and is totally anonymous, is that individual results might imply which individual answered that particular way. This problem is addressed by reporting results to the leader in aggregate, including measures of mean and deviation. This provides the needed useful information: whether their leadership supports high-quality LMX relationships or otherwise. That understanding informs leadership development strategies for that leader.

WHAT TO DO WITH THE INFORMATION

If the results indicate high-quality LMX relationships, then the leader can congratulate him- or herself. The leader should keep studying leadership, however, because improvement is always possible. For example, the leader might be an "unconscious competent," and research has shown that bringing these good qualities to conscious consideration makes the characteristics available for improvement. This is much like being a "natural" at some sport—when effective coaching is applied, the athlete improves.

If the survey results do not show high-quality LMX relationships, then the leader has work to do. The goal of having higher-quality relationships is to improve organizational results. Leaders who want better results tactically plan to improve inputs to those results. One set of inputs that is very much in the leader's span of control is how the leader behaves toward each team member. A key aspect of excellent leadership, according to team members, is that the leader consistently uses the right personal behaviors to build and maintain a great relationship with each team member. A leader can, and perhaps should, behave differently depending on the team member. Team members differ in so many ways, such as personality, experience, and non-work life. A leader who knows more about his or her team members can relate better to each individually. Good relations are the cornerstone of good organizational results such as low turnover and high productivity.

Research has shown that if a leader acts in five specific ways with each team member, the LMX quality improves, resulting in better outcomes. The five leader actions are:

- **Inclusion:** Inclusion behavior is the authentic request by a leader for input from a member regarding their tasks (and listening to the answers!).
- **Modeling:** This behavior refers to both being a role model in how a leader expects team members to look and act and also helping team members improve their talent by modeling to accomplish the work or providing a stand-in expert.
- **Improvement:** Leaders have the power to help their team members advance their careers, obtain and develop skills, and build confidence. Leaders use inclusion to develop individual improvement plans.
- **Rewarding:** A leader who acts in a rewarding manner provides intrinsic and extrinsic rewards for work done by the member. Rewards are both formal and informal and should be individualized for the best results.
- **Respecting:** This behavior is the most personal of the five behaviors in that it is comprised of empathy and sympathy. A leader shows interest, confidence, and encouragement. Listening is a large part of respecting.

These behaviors are leadership habits, and, as with any habit, can be developed. There are many ways to instill new

habits, but they all start with first identifying what needs to be changed. Second, create a goal with a measurable end result. Third, create a plan for change, such as a SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) goal for each change item (more on these surveys and SMART goals is found at the website for Five Star Leadership, www.lmxpro.com). Leaders who want to have better results act on plans that create better results. LMX quality can be improved, and behaving in the five ways described does improve quality. Improved LMX quality improves results, science says.

Changing a habit is not easy. A habit is an automatic way of acting when in the presence of a set of environmental cues. Despite a person's desire to change, the behavior will continue to manifest without a conscious effort to identify the cues and self-monitor behavior. Psychologists have found that for a behavior to be modified it is necessary for the individual to be reminded of the cues and associated behaviors.

For example, if current leader behavior is to announce changes in job functions only in group settings, then a goal stating they will first discuss the change with individuals would support respecting behavior. The goal acknowledges the desire to change, and measurement will show whether change is occurring. In this way, group announcements that are not conducive to improvement of exchange relationships are replaced with individual meetings with discussions that do lead to improved LMX quality. Improved LMX quality is related to improved outcomes.

Measurement is required for successful behavior modification for two reasons: (1) to see if the goal is met; and (2) as a constant reminder to use the new behavior. Measuring may have several components, because behaviors are complex and are affected by variables such as the environment, cues, current moods, the leader's actions, and the other party. These variables that affect behavior can be accounted for through goal definition. For example, if the leader's new behavior is to have individual meetings to discuss change, then the goal may specify both the actions and the venue. The goal might state not only that there will be individual meetings, but also where these meetings will take place, to avoid environmental cues tied to location. Measurement would account for this by requiring scoring that includes the environmental change. In this example, if the meeting took place, but not in the location specified in the goal (e.g. the member's office, the conference room), then a low score would be recorded, and the reason for the low score noted for reflection.

Scoring must be recorded in a way that allows the leader wanting change to see past and present, not only for progress reports but also to note how scoring may have changed. The scoring can be dynamic over time as the leader learns more about what change looks like. Leaders may get tougher on themselves, or they may relax certain aspects of judgment. A simple journal usually is sufficient.

The following list presents examples of goals for improving each leader relations–oriented behavior. The goals may not be textbook perfect, but these goals are what team leaders have written in workshops to use in their own change processes:

- **Inclusion:** I will use active listening, scoring a point when I use a summation sentence to show understanding of what I am being told. My goal is to have at least one point for each discussion over the next three months.
- **Modeling:** I will review the expectations I have of my team members and compare how I act regarding those expectations. I will score myself 1 to 5 stars at the end of each day as to how I am as a model. In this way, I will be a good example to follow. For areas of improvement that team members can learn from others, I will recruit the right role models to be involved with my team. My twofold goal is to score five stars more than 95% of the time and have 100% of the improvement areas covered.
- **Improvement:** I will go back through last year's employee review results to summarize the desired development each individual expressed. I will meet with each over the next month to find out what they really want and what we can do together to accomplish the mutually desired improvement.
- **Rewarding:** With input from the team members, by the end of next month, I will redesign the rewards that are paid from the budget I control. I will ensure that each member has at least one reward available to earn that is "Of High Importance" as scored by the team member.
- **Respecting:** For each "organizational announcement," I will decide whether a one-on-one with each member is merited. If merited, I will track how many times I actually held these meetings prior to the general announcement, with a goal of 100% over the next two months.

CONCLUSION

Leaders who want to improve their team leadership results will look to the relationships they have with each team member. Understanding the current reality through observation or testing provides the baseline from which to build skills. Focusing on the five behaviors that are shown to be important to creating and maintaining the mutual trust and understanding of the work to be done is a cost-effective and personally rewarding developmental strategy. Using behavior change techniques is an easy way to be a better leader. ▪▪

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