

Upwards Leadership- The Missing Art of Empowerment

Today all of us (whether in the public, private or third sectors) required to be flexible, adaptable, responsible, and accountable. Organisations are more complex, careers are typically spent in several rather than just one or two organisations, and we are much more able to change our career focus. We work in flatter organisations than was once the case and the implications of decisions are typically more far reaching.

Against this background, upwards leadership (by this I mean to your line manager) assumes ever greater significance, yet it is a topic that is rarely discussed, debated - or even recognised. Not one of my nearly 100 books around the subject of leadership and management even list upwards leadership in their index! It is though, in my view, one of the key aspects of empowerment. That's a bold claim, but let me explain.

Empowerment relies on trust. I'm not going to empower someone I don't trust. In fact I'll do exactly the opposite - I'll check and control and won't delegate. It is therefore my responsibility as a leader to develop that trust, and to enable me to do that, I need to have a mechanism that makes me feel that the trust I give is repaid. Here's where upwards leadership comes into the frame. If all I'm looking for is that the tasks I set are completed, then that's not empowerment. Empowerment means giving you responsibility, accountability and authority for the achievement of objectives, and then you the freedom to achieve them in your way, taking account of the reality of the situation. So, it stands to reason that you'll approach that objective in the way that most makes sense to you, and it sometimes won't make sense to me. When this happens, I'm going to become slightly concerned (after all I don't really understand what's going on) and what will prevent me interfering and becoming embroiled in what you should be doing is your upwards leadership. Lead me, tell me what's going on, explain why your tackling whatever it is in a way that's slightly (or very!) different to what I expect, and I'll stay out of your hair. Don't do it, and I'll be sucked back into your business to keep my emotions in check!

At this stage, you may be thinking "But what right have I got to lead upwards?" I suggest the question should be "What right have I got NOT to lead upwards?". Time was when our line managers had done our job, come through the ranks and therefore knew as much as - or more - than we did. But no longer! Information overwhelms us if we let it. The speed of change (technological or otherwise) is already incredible and it's getting faster, and the demands of the market place are getting steeper and steeper. It's not feasible for our line managers to know everything, so we have to lead them. But how?

First, it is important to build rapport with your line manager. You don't necessarily have to like your line manager, but unless you can establish a relationship that allows openness and honesty, attempts to lead upwards can easily be mistaken for manipulation. So, learn to read and understand the styles of those that you work for. For example:

- How does your line manager like information passed to him or her?
- What is their learning style?
- Are they interested in the idea or the outcome, the result on the business or the impact on the people?

Secondly, make sure that you know what matters to you, to your line manager and to the organisation. Understanding your own values will give you a firm foundation so that you will not be buffeted by office politics - the games that others chose to play - and you can use what matters to the organisation and to your line manager in the way you lead upwards. "Remembering how important is to you/us as a business, it seems to me that should be the way forward".

Next, make sure that you get clear direction from your line manager, and you understand the freedom that you have. Gaining clarity is not always easy, but it is worth the effort. Once you have that clarity, you can lead your line effectively. You'll know when the decision is yours to make, and when it's not.

Finally, always, always make sure you really know the objective and end game. Often you'll be given a task to perform, but without understanding the objective, your mind will be constrained, and so will your actions. This is when your questioning and listening abilities will be tested, because these are key to you gaining clarity and freedom of action. Making sure that you have this information is a key upwards leadership skill, because just like you, your line manager can mistake action for progress.

Leading upwards is a key but much overlooked leadership skill. Our ability to influence our line managers so that they are not working in isolation and making decisions based on false information or limited knowledge can be the difference between success and failure.