DON’T BE AFRAID TO GO WHERE YOUR HEART IS:
A discussion of leadership with Carrie Clark

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As students in the Masters of Science program at the University of Toronto, we have heard a lot about the importance of being leaders in our profession. However, as we have only had limited clinical experience as leaders at this point in our fledgling careers, it is natural that we are still wondering what good leadership looks like in the workplace. To help gain a better understanding of leadership in mental health, we used the Canadian Practice Process Framework (Polatajko, Craik, Davis, & Townsend, 2007) to determine how we could achieve our goal.

The ‘practice context’ that shaped our actions included the requirements of this assignment, which was to learn about leadership in a mental health setting and to disseminate what we learn in the form of an electronic compendium. As we ‘entered’ this project, we reflected on what we were bringing to this project and what was influencing our choices. Through our discussion, we determined that we really did not know much about the topic and felt that we would learn the most about it if we were to speak with someone knowledgeable working in the mental health field. We ‘assessed/evaluated’ what currently existed in terms of inspirational interviews with mental health leaders but did not find any readily accessible accounts. We ‘agreed on our objective/plan’ which was to first interview a leader in mental health, and then to disseminate the information to our OT classmates in written form.

We requested an interview with Ms. Carrie Clark – an advanced practice clinician at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) and an assistant professor in the Departments of Occupational Therapy and Psychiatry at the University of Toronto. She obtained a Bachelor of Science in Occupational Therapy and a Masters in Sociology. She has worked for over 20 years in mental health in various roles, and has also been led CAMH-wide projects such as the development and implementation of the electronic health records interdisciplinary care plan. We prepared a semi-structured interview guide that addressed our topics of interest. We ‘implemented’ the first half of the plan by conducting the interview with her and she spoke to us about the different roles she’s had, the influence of her occupational therapy education, the importance of empowerment, the
necessity of reflective practice, and leadership as a continuum. We then implemented the second half of the plan by transcribing the recorded interview and by synthesizing/summarizing this information onto a document. Below is a summary of the themes that emerged in the interview. We ‘monitored’ the plan as it was being implemented to ensure that it was properly executed. We will ‘evaluate’ our plan by reviewing the draft version of this written product, and by ensuring that our objectives of the plan are met. We will ‘conclude’ with some inspirational messages and finalize this document before submitting it and ‘exiting’ the assignment process.

On Her Various Roles

Ms. Clark had been interested in leadership opportunities from a young age – from being involved in student council and heading the cheer-leading club in high school to taking leadership roles as an occupational therapy student. She stated the importance of having people who believed in her and challenging her to take risks. Her fourth year research project was on boarding homes and that experience helped her land a position at COTA health. As the first occupational therapy new grad to work at COTA, Ms. Clark needed to advocate for herself so that her opinions were heard and so that her contributions were recognized. At this point for her, leadership meant being able to balance what she wanted out of life and work. She knew routines would be problematic for her, as she wanted roles that would offer her choice, variety and diversity. She started working in the forensics field, where she was asked to train trainers. Despite being a new grad with limited experience in that area, Ms. Clark was able to use her theoretical knowledge about the topic to fulfill her responsibilities. To increase her confidence level, Ms. Clark completed an assertiveness training course. Her next role was that of a case manager and from there she moved on to be a day treatment coordinator. She became the program manager of a day center next, and then she stepped away from her practice for awhile to have kids and to pursue her Masters degree. When she returned to the field, she entered into an advanced practice clinician role, where she did some
consulting and program development. This role evolved into one within the schizophrenia program and then she moved to a systems leadership role.

Ms. Clark emphasized that leadership develops over time and through various roles; she described leadership as occurring in little pieces which all contribute to increasing feelings of confidence and self-efficacy. She also described the importance of having someone believe in you and push you to take risks. She recalled a time when a mentor by the name of Paula Gehring recommended Ms. Clark to replace her in chairing the grand rounds, which would be an awfully formidable task for anyone who’s never done such a thing before. Although Ms. Clark was ‘scared to death’, she decided to take the risk and tried her hand at chairing the grand rounds anyway. She mentioned that having someone like Paula believe in her significantly helped her to push her boundaries and to put herself in novel leadership positions. Ms. Clark continued to express that while it is important to have people believe in you to take risks, it is also important to demonstrate self-initiative in becoming a leader. Managers and colleagues take notice when you take risks and push beyond your comfort zone. In doing so, you may be offered new opportunities that allow you to further develop your leadership skills as your competencies increase. Extra education and assertiveness courses such as the one Ms. Clark completed are also helpful in developing leadership skills and should be strongly considered by us as new graduates. See Appendix I for some strategies for increasing assertiveness.

On the Influence of Her Occupational Therapy Education

Ms. Clark described her education in occupational therapy as being useful in helping her deconstruct situations in an effective manner. Strategies that she learned at school such as activity analysis have been useful throughout her career for helping her structure her thinking when problem solving, leading to more comprehensive solutions. Her education has also provided her with a unique
lens to view disability, as it allowed her to appreciate the limitations in various situations while reminding her to be strengths focused in her approach to dealing with them. “Occupational therapy has given us good tools on how to be creative. There’s an optimism,” Ms. Clark stated.

The optimism that Ms. Clark mentioned stems from the recovery framework, which is founded on the principles of hope, empowerment, choice, and responsibility (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2009). Ms. Clark stated that these principles are not only relevant for helping clients with their recovery, but also for effective leadership of team members as well. As occupational therapists, we are well-positioned to promote these principles using the enablement skills listed in the Canadian Model of Client-Centered Enablement (Townsend, Polatajko, Craik, & Davis, 2007). For example, by advocating for a team member to have increased autonomy in their role, we would be providing them with increased choice and responsibility. Coaching a team member through difficult tasks may provide them with hope that they can achieve their desired goals and collaborating with them on what they want their role to look like would empower them to take charge.

Our occupational therapy education emphasizes the importance of using relevant theory to guide our practice. Ms. Clark demonstrates continued use of theory by incorporating the Person-Environment-Occupation Model (Law et al., 1996) into her everyday practice. Her understanding of the relationships between person, place, and environment allows her to time her interactions with others to achieve her objectives. In being a change agent, timing can be very important when promoting a cause and Ms. Clark has recognized this. For example, if she would like to advocate for the implementation of a new program but she knows her manager is experiencing increased environmental demands, Ms. Clark may understand that her manager’s decision making ability is compromised and thus she may wait for a better time to approach her manager.

Ms. Clark’s understanding of the importance of balance between self-care, productivity, and leisure occupations has helped her understand the impact that occupational balance has on her own
productivity. As occupational balance has been found to contribute to health and well-being (Backman, 2010), Ms. Clark strives to maintain this balance so that she can optimally function as a leader in her workplace. This is an important concept for us as new grads to remember as we embark on our careers: we must first take care of ourselves and our own patterns of occupation so that we can be effective in helping and leading others.

**On the Importance of Empowerment**

The concept of empowerment was ultimately introduced as the conversation deepened around the influence of OT on leadership. Empowerment refers to the personal and social processes that transform relationships so that power is shared more equally (Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists, 2002), and is considered to be a core change agent outcome in the Occupational Therapy Profile of Canada (CAOT, 2007). This came up in the interview as Ms. Clark identified the need for OT leaders to effect change by taking risks in giving power to, as opposed to taking power from, others. She continued to express that leaders need to create such a power exchange in order to “confront, own, and ultimately overcome or fix the challenges that exist”. Ms. Clark further mentioned that there were three premises of empowerment that should be considered when applying this concept into practice. The first premise is ‘discourse’- one must first hear what others are saying before knowing that a problem exists. The second premise is ‘risk’- one must be knowledgeable about the risks posed to themselves and others, and to understand the consequences of taking and not taking these risks when attempting to resolve an issue. Ms. Clark specifically identified OTs as being particularly afraid to speak up because they are usually afraid of making mistakes; to this, she responded “If you have something that’s sitting there in your head and you’re afraid to act on it, that is the worst tragedy.” She continued to say that as a leader “one should not let past mistakes paralyze them from trying to do something again in the future”. The
third premise is ‘action’- one must act to take a risk. For example, taking a risk by speaking up. When doing so, they must be aware of who their audience is (i.e., the stakeholders involved when taking this risk), and they must work with those in their team who have influential power when acting on this risk. Collectively, this discussion highlights the importance of risk-taking and empowerment as vital leadership traits in mental health and OT practice.

A Personal Narrative on Empowerment

To further supplement the conceptualization of empowerment, Ms. Clark kindly shared an example of a time when she empowered others. A while ago, she facilitated a group of clinicians that met weekly for a project that entailed developing tutorials regarding best practices in leadership. Throughout the entire time that she chaired this group, she empowered individual team members to take on leadership roles by constantly encouraging them to make key decisions on the project. Group members collectively decided on the framework for the tutorials, and on the definitions and best practice components to be included. Ms. Clark essentially tried to foster empowerment by allowing members to take on the project “as their own”. With her effective leadership style, the team was able to successfully finish the project, which has now become an e-learning tool that can be used in health care centers worldwide (IHI, n.d.). Upon being asked to reflect on this leadership experience, Ms. Clark exclaimed that it was a thoroughly “rewarding opportunity to see people grow, to see people take on new initiatives, and to see their ‘aha’ moments”. Her story nicely exemplifies some of the benefits to being an OT leader in mental health practice.

On the Necessity of Reflective Practice

Reflective practice has been integral to the field of occupational therapy right from its inception as client problems are socially constructed, complex, and situated to time and place (Cohn, Boyt Schell, & Crepeau, 2010). Relating to leadership, it is important to reflect on how you react to
others in various situations and consider whether there are ways to better handle similar situations in the future. When asked about how she reflects on her own practice, Ms. Clark spoke about being aware of her own personality traits and how they may affect other people’s contributions. More specifically, Ms. Clark spoke about how she consciously evaluates how she behaves in situations and realizes her high energy and boldness may not always be matched by those around her. Therefore, when she is looking for unbiased feedback from her team she may ask for anonymously written notes rather than asking them to verbalize their opinions. “It is important to ask for feedback and to collaborate with others,” she emphasized. For those of us who identify as being less assertive, being aware and reflecting on this is important so that we can recognize instances where we need to put forth that extra effort to speak up.

Knowing your strengths and limitations is very important, according to Ms. Clark. “If I had to do a budget, I’d be very bad...I prefer visioning, and networking, and bringing in lots of people and creating plans,” she explained. Being aware of personal limitations is in fact listed as an Essential Competency as described by the College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario (COTO, 2003). This competency is considered a professional responsibility which allows the occupational therapist to practice safely, ethically, and effectively (COTO, 2003). Reflecting on your skills and abilities is essential when job searching as well so that you will be in roles that you are comfortable with and enjoy, Ms. Clark advised. That is not to say that you should only apply for positions that you know you have all the skills for, but be realistic and thorough in your research when determining what is required of the role you are interested in.

Regardless of how well-suited you are for any role, however, there will always be aspects of the job that will be more difficult. We asked Ms. Clark how she deals with those aspects of her roles that are more difficult and she again emphasized the importance of collaboration. “You benefit from each others’ strengths,” she explained. Accepting that mistakes are unavoidable is necessary, as
they can be great learning opportunities. Not being afraid of making mistakes can lead to more courage when taking risks, which are necessary for creating change.

Values and beliefs can change over time as well. Ms. Clark described how her “keen zealot approach” has had to be moderated because she understands now that change does not always happen as quickly as she would like it to. She has also developed a deeper understanding of some of the issues that individuals with mental health challenges face and realizes where changes need to be made. However, some values and beliefs may endure and become reinforced with time. For Ms. Clark, these beliefs included the influence of the social determinants of health in creating health inequities and the value in being client-centered. The social determinants of health are the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age, including the health system (World Health Organization, 2011). Ms. Clark’s beliefs regarding its importance have been strengthened through reflection as well as discussion with colleagues and her network of friends and family. “It’s constant, home and here...it’s who you choose to surround yourself with,” she stated.

Other than reflection, what can we as new grads do to self-assess our leadership skills?

There are a number of free leadership assessments available online that we can use to monitor our abilities. For example, the Mind Tools (n.d.) website has an entire section dedicated to discussing the concept of leadership and it includes assessments to gage leadership skills as well as motivation to lead. It discusses results using descriptions of personal characteristics, emotional intelligence, and transformational leadership capability associated with the attained scores and offers articles that address any difficulties that one might be having. Some of the potentially helpful articles included on their website include: ‘building self-confidence,’ ‘thought awareness, rational thinking and positive thinking,’ ‘empathic listening,’ ‘powers of persuasion,’ ‘re-engaging team members,’ and ‘task allocation.’

**On Her View of Leadership as a Continuum**
While many perceive leadership roles to be associated with director/CEO-level positions, Ms. Clark believes that leadership can be defined on a continuum. She posited that leadership can also occur in a variety of smaller forms and gave several examples of this. To Ms. Clark, speaking up on a health care team and suggesting new ideas to improve health care structures or plans are forms of leadership. Advocating for a client during team rounds and saying things like “you know what, the client's not getting the best care that they can get” or “we have to figure out another place for this client to live” or “this client can do something more in their life and I know some people don’t agree with that, but I see something different” are all forms of leadership. Seeing an area for improvement and creating a niche for OTs to work in (e.g., starting a support group for parents and family members) is a form of leadership. Ms. Clark even suggested that taking on a preceptor position and helping a student grow through the provision of supervision and constructive feedback is a form of leadership. Ms. Clark challenges us to change the way we think about leadership roles, and by doing so, she hopes this may make the role of a ‘leader’ less intimidating for us to adopt in practice.

**Last Words, Advice, and Inspirational Messages**

Ms. Clark’s passion for the field of mental health was evident throughout her interview. Key messages that we learned from our interview were: 1) Leadership roles come in pieces throughout one’s career, 2) Knowledge about theories and strategies in occupational therapy can augment one’s leadership style, 3) Empowerment of team members is an essential skill for good leadership, 4) Reflective practice is essential to understand your strengths and limitations so that you may continue to improve your abilities as well as maneuver yourself into roles that are best suited for your skill set, and 6) Leadership can be defined in many different ways so every OT can start building their skills no matter where they are on the leadership continuum.
After speaking with Ms. Clark, we as her interviewers are inspired to develop our own leadership skills so that we would be able to motivate others as she had done to us. We hope that after reading through our interview with her, other new graduates will also be motivated to follow some of the strategies outlined above to develop their own abilities as future leaders in OT and mental health. We have also included recommended activities/exercises in the appendix as a learning resource to enable further leadership skill development. We conclude this document with some final words of advice and inspiration from Ms. Clark:

“If is there something you would like to try, be honest with yourself, and try letting yourself go with one of those fears. Think to yourself: what is the worst thing that can happen? Maybe someone is going to laugh at me or it’s not going to work out. And then think about whether this has happened to anyone else. Has anyone been laughed at? Yes! Has anyone else tried something that hasn’t worked? Yes! Have things been a flop? Yes! It’s okay to make mistakes as long as we learn from them.”

“I think mental health is fantastic! There’s diversity beyond anything you can imagine - no two days are the same. You connect with people in a real human way. But the biggest piece of advice I can give is to not be afraid to take a risk even if it’s a little one, and see what you think. You can always go back!”
References


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Appendix A - Practicing Assertiveness

Assertiveness is a key component of leadership as it facilitates effective communication. It makes it clear to others what it is that you want and it also gives them a chance to respond with their own thoughts and ideas. A good leader can use assertiveness to gain respect and authority, whereas the consequences of non-assertiveness may include a loss of confidence in the leader. Assertiveness not does not come naturally to a lot of people, but fortunately it can be developed and maintained through awareness and practice.

Before we discuss strategies for practicing assertiveness, it may be helpful to learn about some common reasons why some people are less assertive:

1. Lack of practice - you do not test your limits to see if you can increase your assertiveness
2. Formative training - the way you were raised by your parents and other authority figures diminished your capacity to stand up for yourself
3. Being unclear - you are not sure of your own standards and needs
4. Fear of hostility - you are afraid of negative responses and judgement and want others to like you
5. Undervaluing yourself - you do not feel like you have the right to stand firm and demand correct treatment
6. Poor presentation - your self-expression tends to be vague, confusing, or emotional

It is important to keep in mind the 10 assertive rights of every individual. Read through these and truly try to internalize them:

**Assertive Right 1:** I have the right to judge my own behaviour, thoughts and emotions and to take the responsibility for their initiation and consequence. The behaviour of others may have an impact upon me, but I determine how I choose to react and/or deal with each situation. I alone have the power to judge and modify my thoughts, feelings and behaviour. Others may influence my decision, but the final choice is mine.

**Assertive Right 2:** I have the right to offer neither reason nor excuse to justify my behaviour. I need not rely upon others to judge whether my actions are proper or correct. Others may state disagreement or disapproval, but I have the option to disregard their preferences or to work out a compromise. I may choose to respect their preferences and consequently modify my behaviour. What is important is that it is my choice. Others may try to manipulate my behaviour and feelings by demanding to know my reasons and by trying to persuade me that I am wrong, but I know that I am the ultimate judge.

**Assertive Right 3:** I have the right to judge whether I am responsible for finding solutions to others’ problems. I am ultimately responsible for my own psychological well-being and happiness. I may feel concern and compassion and good will for others, but I am neither responsible for nor do I have the
ability to create mental stability and happiness for others. My actions may have caused others' problems indirectly; however, it is still their responsibility to come to terms with the problems and to learn to cope on their own. If I fail to recognize this assertive right, others may choose to manipulate my thoughts and feelings by placing the blame for their problems on me.

**Assertive Right 4:** I have the right to change my mind. As a human being, nothing in my life is necessarily constant or rigid. My interests and needs may well change with the passage of time. The possibility of changing my mind is normal, healthy and conducive to self-growth. Others may try to manipulate my choice by asking that I admit error or by stating that I am irresponsible; it is nevertheless unnecessary for me to justify my decision.

**Assertive Right 5:** I have the right to say "I don't know."

**Assertive Right 6:** I have the right to make mistakes and be responsible for them. To make a mistake is part of the human condition. Others may try to manipulate me, having me believe that my errors are unforgivable, that I must make amends for my wrongdoing by engaging in proper behaviour. If I allow this, my future behaviour will be influenced by my past mistakes, and my decisions will be controlled by the opinions of others.

**Assertive Right 7:** I have the right to be independent of the good will of others before coping with them. It would be unrealistic for me to expect others to approve of all my actions, regardless of their merit. If I were to assume that I required others' goodwill before being able to cope with them effectively, I would leave myself open to manipulation. It is unlikely that I require the goodwill and/or cooperation of others in order to survive. A relationship does not require 100 percent agreement. It is inevitable that others will be hurt or offended by my behaviour at times. I am responsible only to myself, and I can deal with periodic disapproval from others.

**Assertive Right 8:** I have the right to be illogical in making decisions. I sometimes employ logic as a reasoning process to assist me in making judgments. However, logic cannot predict what will happen in every situation. Logic is not much help in dealing with wants, motivations and feelings. Logic generally deals with "black or white," "all or none" and "yes or no" issues. Logic and reasoning don't always work well when dealing with the gray areas of the human condition.

**Assertive Right 9:** I have the right to say "I don't understand."

**Assertive Right 10:** I have the right to say "I don't care."

Strategies for increasing assertiveness:

1. Be clear when making known your desires and feelings. Do not allow yourself to be side tracked by others’ perceived or actual reactions to your wishes. Formulate a short, clear, assertive statement of your goal, taking into account others’ opinions but persisting in what it is you want. "Yes I understand [other’s response] but I still want [state goal]"
2. Express feelings about a situation without threatening others. One technique you can use is OBEFA:

O - Opening statement: I’m having a difficulty/a challenge
B - Behaviour: When ____________ (specify problem/behaviour)
E - Effect: Because ______________ (describe impact on you)
F - Feelings: I feel _______________ (state feelings/emotions)
A - Action: Could we discuss this? I’d like to work out a solution with you. What are you thoughts on this?

3. Practice your body language while engaging in different scenarios that may require assertiveness with a friend and ask for feedback. Maintain direct eye contact, appear interested and alert, but not angry. Stand or sit erect, possibly leaning forward slightly. Stand or sit at a normal conversational distance from the other. Use relaxed, conversational gestures. Use a factual, not emotional tone of voice. Sound determined and full of conviction, but not overbearing. Remember that timing is important when discussing an issue with another; choose a time when both parties are relaxed. A neutral site is best.

Remember that building assertiveness takes time. It may be helpful to consider that assertive statements are characterized by “I” statements and to practice using these types of statements in everyday life. Assertive statements are usually effective in helping to change or reinforce others’ behaviour and they run a low risk of damaging a relationship if they are done correctly. True assertive statements do not attack the others’ self-esteem or put them on the defensive. Using assertive statements help prevent the storage of negative emotions and contribute to developing strong relationships. For further practice and tips in assertiveness training, consider taking an assertiveness training course

References:

Appendix B- Giving and Receiving Feedback Effectively

Appropriately giving and receiving feedback are both important skills to have to be an effective leader. It is more common to receive feedback on “what” we did, but it is equally important to seek out feedback on “how” it was done, to understand the impact we have on others (ref). Below are some tips on how to strengthen your your skills in this area so that issues can be heard and appropriate actions can be taken to induce change for the better. Take time to read through them and commit to trying out some of the embedded tips/exercises suggested.

**Tips for Giving Feedback:**
When you provide feedback, keep in mind the following:

- **Plan.** This helps you develop a framework for providing effective feedback. You should think ahead of time about the behavior that should be highlighted and how you can help the person receiving feedback improve.
- **Provide examples.** Vague criticism fosters anxiety. Tangible examples are required to highlight the feedback. You do not need to provide dozens of examples. Hopefully, you can make the point with a couple representative observations. If you don’t have examples, you cannot provide the feedback.
- **Highlight consequences.** Highlight the consequences of what you have observed or heard so the person receiving the feedback understands why your feedback is important. Try to create connections between their actions, how others reacted, and the likely consequences for them personally.
- **Motivate.** Use motivational techniques in the discussion. The receiver of the feedback is bound to be disappointed by the feedback. Look for opportunities to build the morale of the team member as well, so that he or she will be eager to improve.
- **Sandwich.** The leader should start the session with positive comments, then get to the feedback and finish with positive, motivating comments. Many people think this is trite and perhaps obvious. However, it is still a valid way to proceed. If you can find some positive things to say, open and close the discussion by mentioning them.
- **Monitor your aggressiveness.** If your partner seems to be resisting your message, or starts defending him/herself, maybe you’re trying too hard to convince them you’re right. Try stepping back and framing your observations as an opinion to consider. Remember, your goal is to improve their understanding, not to provide them with “the truth.”
- **Allow time for feedback.** The process needs to be a dialogue between the leader and the team member. So, seek feedback from the team member and allow him or her to agree, disagree or provide his/her perspective. It is possible that he or she may have mitigating factors that you were not previously aware of.
- **Set a time frame for action and follow-up.** The leader should document any agreed upon actions/solutions and circulate them to the team member and ensure that they are completed at a certain time line. Before the meeting is over, the leader and team member should also agree on a follow-up time frame to check progress of the action/solution.
**Tips for Receiving Feedback:**

When you receive feedback, keep in mind the following:

- **Know what to ask for.** Be specific in your request.
- **Prepare your sources.** To get more than “you did a nice job,” you need to alert your sources (your mentor and others) to the specific feedback you want.
- **Place clear boundaries around the feedback.** Let people know what you want and how much feedback you want to hear at one time. If you fail to define precisely what you want, you run the risk of hearing too much. Once that happens, it’s easy to get defensive. You might shut down and stop listening, or even lash out at someone trying to share the “truth” as they see it. Either way, it might be difficult for the person to be candid with you in the future.
- **Make it as painless as possible for the other person.** Just listen, don’t quibble. Don’t defend yourself. If you want feedback, you must accept that what someone tells you is “true” from their perspective. You don’t have to believe it or act on it, but you must listen openly. Ask questions to make sure you understand. If you aren’t getting helpful feedback, ask specific behavioural questions that can be answered with simple facts or “yes” or “no”: Did I interrupt anyone? Whom did I interrupt the most? Did I get everybody’s input? Whom did I leave out?
- **Keep asking “What else?” until they tell you “That’s all.”**
- **Assume good intentions, and that the person values and wants to improve your relationship even if the feedback expresses temporary dissatisfaction.**
- **Be accepting.** Accept the impact of your behaviour as reality for the other person. You don’t have to agree with it. Don’t reject first impressions from new people. They are valid, important, and can provide some useful data you wouldn’t otherwise have.
- **Focus on the future.** Ask for specific advice on what to do differently and what to repeat going forward. Thank people. Keep them willing to give you more. Try out some suggestions, and make it visible. Let people know how their feedback was helpful.

**References:**


Appendix C- Learning How to Empower Others

Earlier in this document, we had identified the value and importance of empowerment in leadership roles. Power sharing between the leader and team members can facilitate productivity and ingenuity, can foster feelings of accomplishment and contribution, and can create an overall harmonious working environment. Below, we have included a list of strategies and activities that you can use to empower others as an effective leader:

1. Demonstrate That You Value People
   Demonstrate that your regard for people shines through in all of your actions and words. Ensure that your facial expression, your body language, and your words express what you are thinking about the people who report to you. Demonstrate your appreciation for each person’s unique value. Despite a person’s performance on the task at hand, your value for them as a human being should never falter and always be visible.

2. Share Leadership Vision
   Help people feel that they are part of something bigger than themselves and their individual job. Do this by making sure they know and have access to the organization’s overall mission, vision, and strategic plans.

3. Share Goals and Direction
   Share the most important goals and direction for your group. Where possible, either make progress on goals measurable and observable, or ascertain that you have shared your picture of a positive outcome with the people responsible for accomplishing the results. If you share a picture and share meaning, you have agreed upon what constitutes a successful and acceptable deliverable. Empowered members can then chart their course without close supervision.

4. Trust People
   Trust the intentions of people to do the right thing, make the right decision, and make choices that, while maybe not exactly what you would decide, still work. When members receive clear expectations from their leaders, they relax and trust you. They focus their energy on accomplishing, not on wondering, worrying, and second-guessing.

5. Provide Information for Decision Making
   Make certain that you have given people, or made sure that they have access to, all of the information they need to make thoughtful decisions.

6. Delegate Authority and Impact Opportunities, Not Just More Work
   Do not just delegate the drudge work; delegate some of the fun stuff, too. You know, delegate the important meetings, the committee memberships that influence product development and decision making, and the projects that people and customers notice. The member will grow and develop new skills. Your plate will be less full so you can concentrate on contribution.
7. Provide Frequent Feedback
Provide frequent feedback so that people know how they are doing. Sometimes, the purpose of feedback is reward and recognition as well as improvement coaching. People deserve your constructive feedback, too, so they can continue to develop their knowledge and skills (please see Appendix B for tips on giving and receiving feedback).

8. Solve Problems: Don’t Pinpoint Problem People
When a problem occurs, ask what is wrong with the work system that caused the people to fail, not what is wrong with the people.

9. Listen to Learn and Ask Questions to Provide Guidance
Provide a space in which people will communicate by listening to them and asking them questions. Guide by asking questions, not by telling grown up people what to do. People generally know the right answers if they have the opportunity to produce them. When team member brings you a problem to solve, ask, “what do you think you should do to solve this problem?” Or, ask, “what action steps do you recommend?” Team members can demonstrate what they know and grow in the process. Eventually, you will feel comfortable telling the member that he or she need not ask you about similar situations. You trust their judgment.

10. Help Others Feel Rewarded and Recognized for Empowered Behavior
When team members feel under-compensated, under-titled for the responsibilities they take on, under-noticed, under-praised, and under-appreciated, you should not expect results from team-member empowerment. The basic needs of team members must feel met for them to give you their discretionary energy, that extra effort that people voluntarily invest in work. For successful empowerment in team members, recognition plays a significant role.

References: