

Initiating Change Through Participative Leadership

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As organizations compete for an advantage in the market, change initiatives are constant and regularly evolving in the workplace. These changes are led in different ways but are all necessary as they contribute to important factors such as increased efficiencies, production levels, customer satisfaction, innovation, employee retention and development, public perception, and revenue gains. In order to effectively carry out change initiatives, there must be established leader-follower relationships that allow for fluid implementation and sustained progress toward organizational goals and objectives. One of the more effective methods used by leaders is participative or democratic leadership (Lussier & Achua, 2015).

Differing from authoritarian and laissez-faire styles, democratic leadership focuses on group member participation and collaboration throughout the decision-making process (Rustin & Armstrong, 2012). Implementing change initiatives through this type of participative leadership involves cooperation and often consensus from multiple parties, making it difficult to carry out in some instances, but rewarding and impactful when successfully implemented. The following will describe the various components of participative leadership and how they can enhance the change process.

DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP

Democratic leadership promotes cooperation and collaboration toward the overarching objectives of the leader (Raelin, 2012). With most initiatives, both aspects are crucial as changes can impact a variety of stakeholders, both internal and external. Some of the positive components that typically arise from this type of participative leadership are increased collaboration, empowerment, leadership development, innovation, and creativity (Page & Ferguson, 2011). Potential downfalls and challenges that can occur with democratic leadership include delayed decision-making and dependence of subordinates (Kensler & Woods, 2012). Although democratic leadership, like other leadership styles, is not a perfect solution for every organizational initiative, it does have direct links to employee satisfaction, retention, and performance levels (Busse & Regenber, 2019).

Authority

Although democratic leadership relies on group contributions and collaboration, the leader must establish authority and set distinct expectations, objectives, roles, and timelines for followers (Gastil, 1994). Utilizing this authority can be effective when there is transparency surrounding the leader's agenda, goals, and vision. In order to carry out objectives and meet goals, the leader should establish clear communication and correspondence with followers to ensure they have a firm understanding of priority areas and responsibilities as initiatives progress (Puddington, 2014).

Functions

Since most will agree that leadership is a behavior, it is important to understand how a group functions under democratic leadership (Bass, 1990). As a group works together under democratic leadership, it is key for all actions to coincide with the objectives and goals set forth by the leader. These make up the leadership and group functions required to effectively gain consensus and carry out initiatives (Klinker, 2006; Northouse, 2015).

Distributing Responsibility

One of the most important functions of effective democratic leadership is the distribution of responsibility (Foels, Driskell, Mullen & Salas, 2000). Leaders using this approach should focus on maximizing the involvement and insight of each group member. As a group works toward an objective or initiative under democratic leadership, there should be established responsibilities for each follower involved. This creates an understanding of which task each member is responsible for, establishing empowerment and potential development of leadership skills and abilities for the group (Gastil, 1994; Page & Ferguson, 2011).

Empowerment

Another important function of democratic leadership is empowerment. Empowering followers to complete tasks and make decisions is essential as the leader strives to attain short and long term objectives. This also creates an opportunity for followers to challenge themselves and develop leadership skills that will be necessary for future growth (Beerbohm, 2015). Effective democratic leaders will establish a supportive environment with their followers and develop them into leaders (Gastil, 1994).

Aiding Deliberation

While distributing responsibility and empowering others are important functions of democratic leadership, leaders must also aid deliberation in order to maximize effectiveness (Gastil, 1994). The leader must have the ability to identify current and potential issues and foster genuine deliberation that is geared toward a solution. An effective democratic leader will use a methodic approach to maintain progress with followers as they work toward objectives and an overarching vision (Raelin, 2012).

SUMMARY

Change is constant and leaders must be mindful of their approach to initiatives and decision-making practices in general. Participative leadership is one way to increase buy-in and overall commitment toward change initiatives. As studies have shown, participation and inclusion efforts often result in enhanced performance due to increased motivation, satisfaction, and connectedness to the initiative.

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