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Lateral Leadership: How to gain support from others without hierarchical power

Many management theories concentrate on working more effectively with subordinated employees. Nevertheless, executive employees as well as middle managers regularly have to accept support from people outside their formal authority. In fact, a study by Henry Mintzberg shows that executives spend more than half their time organizing relationships outside their direct responsibility. Of course, that includes time spend with customers and suppliers but also with negotiations and coordination with colleagues, employees of other departments as well as their contact networks. Even concerning their own subordinates, managers quickly realize that formal authority has its limits. And there is also the fact that the upcoming Generation Y is increasingly less willing to accept an authority figure's standpoint only because of his or her position.

Therefore, mobilizing people from outside one's own formal area of responsibility has become an essential success factor. In their article "Leadership without Leadership" („Führen ohne Führung“) at the Harvard Business Manager 1/2004 Stefan Kühl, Thomas Schnelle and Wolfgang Schnelle see three important components for that:

- Using power in organizations
- Designing a real dialogue
- Building trust

Using power in organizations

Power games are often hidden and the parties involved mostly do not realize the abuse of power, refer to their higher competence, their rights, their own superiors or competences. Thus, power often spreads in zones of insecurity where there are hardly any rules.

As a lateral leader, everything is about analysing the balance of power and power games in the beginning: where do the players take their influence from and which grey areas or zones of insecurity are behind it?

Besides hierarchical power, there are many more sources of power in a company: origin, money, majority, knowledge, function or contacts. Power games are always negotiations: for example, as a lateral leader, I can create spaces of exchange to channel and deliberately enable power games. That could especially take place in informal spaces such as the margins of meetings or conferences.

Deep-rooted power relations can often be loosened by including new players or by means of new and preferably simple rules (e.g. asking about expectations at the beginning of a meeting, ...)

Exploring and pleading: designing a real dialogue

A real dialogue consists of exploring and pleading. Exploration is about asking about your vis-à-vis's assumptions, opinions and standpoints, understanding your vis-à-vis's needs and worries. Here, listening actively without interrupting is crucial. How could he or she personally benefit from your project? What could strengthen his or her position in the organization?

This is the only way to identify the matching exchange currency and create a mindset of partnership. Summaries or formulations using one's own words ensure mutual understanding.

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It is equally important to clearly express one's own position, to plead for one's own standpoint. Clearly present assumptions that lead to your opinion and position and use reliable data and facts in your argumentation, no anecdotes. Offer a clear picture that drives your action strategy and show your long-term vision. Always send the same messages over a longer period of time. Does your strategy match the general business goals? Integrate your goals into higher business goals. Use terms also used by your vis-à-vis and connect their goals with yours.

Building trust

Trust-based relationships become stronger the more often a granted leap of faith is returned by the other. This does not necessarily have to take place at the same time or in the same exchange currency.

So, the building of trust needs time and works by means of advances. The other way around, it is about not disappointing trust that is put in oneself by others and permanently keeping at it. A trustworthy image also influences indirect contacts in the surroundings. How can I make the reciprocity clearer? One the one hand, it is not bad to name one's own efforts and not playing them down (e.g. "To put this point now on the agenda, I will have to be on the phone for a few hours.") and of course also appreciating other peoples' efforts (e.g. "I know that the report will cost you two days' work ..."). In case of an unbalanced account, it makes sense to clearly mention it (e.g. "My question causes much work, I won't forget that ..."). Even favours also add to the common account! Concerning mutual reciprocity, nobody should make empty promises and one should always clearly formulate one's limits.

Overcoming silo mentality

Even though a company's individual parts may be aware that they are working towards the same goal, all of them have their own priorities and obligations. The customer service could for example have the rule to process all customer requests within 48 hours, even if that means that sometimes at peak times, the making of statistics that are requested by the marketing must be postponed while being aware that these data will help to increase the customer satisfaction. Real cooperation goes beyond one's own goals and must put the higher mutual goal first. It is important to frequently express that and courageously show contradictions.

Cooperation rarely is a perfect balance to which all parties contribute equally. Indeed, mostly rather the opposite is the case, which means that one party needs the resources of another party to realize a certain project without being able to offer something in return right away. When that happens, cooperative good will is put to the test. When colleagues fear that their achievement might be taken for granted or that they might be taken advantage of, they will put their own goals above the other party's goals or request quit pro quos for achievements that they used to grant as a favour as soon as a conflict of interests comes up. It is all about continually talking about this, about frequently naming the valid and possible exchange currencies and their respective advantages.

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Sources:

Leadership without Authority, Allan R. Cohen, David L. Bradford, Wiley, 2005.

Führen ohne Führung von Stefan Kühn, Thomas Schnelle u. Wolfgang Schnelle im Harvard Business Manager 1/2004

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