

Get What's Important Done ...and Get Others to *Willingly* Do the Rest!

By John Kuypers

Never before have leaders been so busy! Organizations are leaner than ever. Leaders are struggling to find time to do the high-payoff work of strategy and relationship-building while getting more frustrated with the time it takes to get others to do what needs doing. Author and leadership expert John Kuypers says that the key to getting what's important done is to get other people to willingly do what you should not be doing...

When I ask business leaders what they would do with an extra one to four hours of time per week, they have no shortage of answers! They want to lift their eyes out of urgent matters and focus on important matters – new business development, stronger customer relationships, strategic planning, not to mention more time for leisure.

What is eating up their time? It is the time they spend getting other people to do what needs doing. One manager sent this short note to his boss, “*Our customer wants us to sponsor their golf tournament. Any thoughts?*” This is classic upward delegation. The subordinate wants his boss to decide. If the boss takes the bait, she will have just taken on anywhere from fifteen to sixty minutes worth of work that didn't belong to her!

In every leadership situation, either the boss is training the subordinate, or the subordinate is training the boss. This struggle appears in many small ways every day. Highly skilled, motivated leaders typically can't help themselves but to fix, solve, alter and improve the work of others around them. They see it as their job. I call this “Doership.” Their focus is on the task itself, not on the person who should be doing the task.

“Leadership” is getting someone else to do the task. **Great leadership is getting them to do it freely and willingly.** Witness the employee whose boss comes up to her and says, “Would you mind solving this problem for me?” The subordinate responds, “Okay, I'll look after it.” Then she heads over to the lunch room where she complains, “My boss just stuck another one to me. Can you believe it? I'm already overworked and he just dumps on more!” A week later, the job is either not done, or done just adequately enough to be called expedient. This employee's apathy is apparent and the frustrated boss often ends up spending significant time cleaning up the work to make it acceptable.

Their frustration leads them to tell, sell, argue, and get upset until they get action. I call this the *hammer*, when leaders

pressure people to do what needs doing. When their people respond with apathy, an angry backlash or stubborn resistance, they reluctantly and resentfully give up, putting up with frustrating, productivity-killing work habits. I call this the doormat, when they *roll over* and stop trying to get others to do what needs doing.

How does a leader break out of this “hammer vs. doormat” dilemma? The answer is as simple as it is difficult. The leader must begin by setting clear leadership goals. This means identifying the *specific* behavior change he or she wants from someone. This in itself is an uncommon skill in leaders, who tend to get blinded by their frustration with the person and fail to see the actual behavior change they want. One manager described his front-line staff person as rude and disrespectful. I asked what that person did. “It was the way he treated a customer!” I pressed him to give me the actual behavior that bothered him. “He said to the customer in a gruff voice, ‘Give me your papers.’”

“What do you want him to say?” I asked.

“I'd like him to say, ‘Please sir, give me your papers.’”

“Okay,” I responded. “So what you want is for that person to add a ‘Please sir,’ to their statement ‘Give me your papers.’ Is that right?”

“Yeah, I guess that's right,” he said, looking at me a bit warily.

“Okay,” I said, “Now you have set a clear leadership goal. Now all you have to do is figure out how to get them to do it, freely and willingly!”

Leaders often fail to see what they want other people to do because they *label* the behavior of others. Their descriptive language reveals this when they use words like rude, incompetent, low initiative, disrespectful, unsupportive and ‘no good’. These labels are judgmental descriptors that

make it difficult to see the actual behavior change the leader wants. Once the actual behavior becomes visible, the solutions are often simple, not complex. In this example, one solution is to ask the employee if he would mind adding 'Please sir' to his customer requests. You can learn more about this process by downloading the one page Leadership Goal-Setting Template for your own use at www.winleadership.com under Articles.

These simple leadership techniques are often easy to say but hard to do if the leader is steaming about a repetitive habit that frustrates the boss on a daily basis. Our leadership coaching & training work on being non-judgmental and present moment behavior-focused helps leaders notice the ways in which they habitually react in ways that *don't* get the results they want. Leaders often fail to see that in their well-intentioned desire to get a task done, they have steamrolled initiative, killed new ideas and removed any ownership their people might have in the work. The result is apathetic, disgruntled, uncooperative people!

Solving these daily frustrations is where there are huge gains to be made in personal productivity. Time spent getting other people to do what they darn well ought to be doing on their own is a major productivity killer. How often do you take calls for other people, help them find answers they ought to know how to get themselves, follow up on work they said they would do but haven't, or try to make up for inadequate work skills and attitudes that obstruct getting the job done?

The key to making major and relatively rapid change in others is best captured in this phrase, *"By the yard, leadership is hard. By the inch, it's a cinch!"* Leaders who are able to focus on the first *inch* that they want from other people, and not the whole yard, will succeed. They will get others to stop procrastinating by clarifying the first step in the task, and helping that person take that first step with confidence. They will make missing deadlines an important issue, and not just look the other way. They will do so with a focus on the behavior and a consistency that earns respect. We have dozens of small, practical techniques in our practice that influence people to willingly change. But they only work if they leader is able to stop labeling the person, and focus on their actual present-moment behaviors.

Many leaders struggle to execute a leadership skill as simple as praising the behavior they want from others. One manager invested significant time to get his employees to reduce lateness and absenteeism. He even put in place a three month financial incentive program. The program was a failure, with not one person earning the payout. I asked him if he ever stood at the door and welcomed his employees when they arrived on time, perhaps handing them a chocolate bar as they walked in? He looked at me in

disbelief. "Why would I do that? I *expect* them to show up on time!"

There is something in the human psyche that makes it difficult to speak words of praise towards someone who is merely doing what is expected. The fallacy of many leaders is they think that by expecting a lot, they will get a lot. Often, they get the opposite. Strong leaders ask a lot but *expect* little. Then they naturally notice, reward and praise the behavior they want when it happens, in the present moment that it actually happens. The result will move that person one inch closer to changing, freely & willingly.

Leaders who want to build influence based on trust and not on control, need courage and strong self-esteem. They must develop a high level of self-awareness of the little ways in which they are inadvertently rewarding the behaviors they don't want, and penalizing the behaviors they do want! Honesty is a classic example of this. Many leaders punish honesty. The employee who speaks up too often, or whose opinions are politically incorrect is often banished to the corporate hinterlands with passed over promotions and a negative reputation with bosses. Staff quickly see this and suddenly every one is wearing a game face, hiding their truth and making it difficult for leaders to see why people are not responding to their leadership efforts. Leaders end up spending large amounts of time pushing to get 'buy-in', time that great leaders get to spend on more productive, higher value work.

The solution for leaders who want to get what's important done is to honestly look into their leadership tool kit and ask themselves if they really have anything more in there besides a doormat and a hammer. If not, the time has come to start adding new tools that will get different results.

Top leaders are like top golfers. The amateur tries to slam the ball 250 yards off the tee, and ends up slicing into the woods. The professional pays attention to dozens and even hundreds of tiny details that shape his or her skill at hitting the ball in such a way as to get the results they want. Top leaders do the same. They focus on learning and mastering hundreds of tiny skills that build trust and influence people to willingly get the work done that needs doing, freeing up their own time to get what's really important done – build the long term health of the business and their own careers.

John Kuypers is president of W.I.N. Leadership Executive Coaching & Training. An author, speaker & coach, John works with organizations who cannot 'command and control' their people to get things done, including healthcare, nursing homes, professional service firms, franchisors, governments and financial services. He can be reached at john@winleadership.com.