How To Take More Risks In Your Leadership



By Rachel Sams

Lead Consultant and Editor

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When I led a newsroom, I learned from staff feedback that my team wanted more support from me.

Our news organization had a lot of change initiatives. I spent time with my bosses to understand what changes were coming and plan how the newsroom could cover them. I worked to protect my team, to try to ensure their workloads didn't explode.

But that happened behind closed doors. My team members couldn't see it. They felt my absence from their day-to-day projects and struggles. That feedback was hard to hear. I worked to show up for them in ways they could see and feel, and ask them more questions about what they needed.

I dove into the effort to become a more vulnerable and responsive manager. It was rewarding, challenging, emotionally taxing, and never-ending.

And that was before a pandemic hit.

Three years into a cycle of endless grief and disruption, any nonprofit leader must focus on their team members first, the work second.

Yes, your organization has standards, and more tasks to accomplish than ever. But you must see your team members as humans first, do all you can to help them get their needs met, and triage the work from there. If your team members can't see and feel that trust from you, they won't level with you about that hovering risk people hesitate to talk about.

Here are some ways nonprofit and risk leaders can build trust with their teams in challenging times.

Ask your team members how they need you to support them, and do as much of it as you can.

It can feel scary to ask open-ended questions like "How can I better help you do your job during a challenging time?" or "How can I work with you better?" But you'll find out what your team members need, which might be very different from what you think they need. Listen. But respond to all the feedback you receive, even if it's just to say, "I can't do that, and here's why."

Be flexible.

When the pandemic first hit, it felt like this was the only tool I had, and I used it liberally with my team. Yes, you can stay off camera for the meeting. Yes, we can adjust your schedule while you deal with virtual school. Yes, we can cover for you while you care for your mom. Flexibility demonstrates that you trust in your employees' skills, talents, and accountability, and that you recognize them as human beings doing the best they can in tough situations.

Show up for those who celebrate and grieve.

At my first job, a colleague told me, "They celebrated with me when I got married, and they supported me when my mom died." That colleague felt a deep connection to the organization because people had shown up for her in both good times and bad. Do something kind for team members who struggle—something personal, not just time off or a reprieve from tasks, although those measures are essential. Send a sick co-worker a gift basket or a gift card for food delivery. If you don't know what would help, ask. And if a team member gets married, has a child, or experiences another life milestone, make sure to plan a special celebration, even if it's virtual. Joy is more important than ever when things are hard and stressful.

Seek out expert help to grow as a coach.

Most of us weren't born knowing how to help other humans reach their potential in their careers. Many people get promoted to management roles because they excel at their line-work job (insurance broker, contract negotiator, etc.), not because they're natural-born coaches. Managing others can get into psychological territory. When you and an employee have a difficult conversation, both your childhood and their childhood are in the room with you — and so are plenty of other influences you can't see. That's a lot to handle! Take advantage of any leadership and management training resources your organization offers, and ask for resources it doesn't. Seek out conferences, sessions, and peer groups that focus solely on management, leadership, and coaching.

Let team members see you struggle and fail.

If you don't share examples of times when you messed up and what you learned, if you never let on that you're getting eaten alive by childcare or health issues or just the world in general, why would you expect a team member to trust you with their struggles, mistakes, or stressors?

Find a mentor, or assemble an informal "sounding board."

Every leader needs an outside person or group of people they can ask, "Am I being decent here? Are my instincts on this good?" Of course you'll need to consult with your supervisors and check your organization's policies and procedures, and never disclose confidential information or personnel details—but in tough situations, everyone needs a second opinion from an outsider they trust.

Learn how to apologize.

A colleague once suggested asking all manager applicants to demonstrate how they would apologize to an employee for a mistake that affected them. When you're wrong, you must own it. If you can't apologize to your team members, trust cannot exist.

Invest time, thought, and care in your one-on-one meetings with team members, and never skip them.

I paused one-on-one meetings with my team members when we were short-staffed. A team member who left the company called me out for it in their exit interview. It surprised me, because this team member consistently missed or rescheduled our meetings; I didn't catch that warning sign. I should have asked this person how we could work together to make our one-on-one meetings more valuable for them and provide the guidance and help they needed.

Know the challenges, stumbles, and growth will never end.

You will always struggle with some aspects of team management and interpersonal leadership. I sure did. This is a lifelong effort. Give yourself and your team members room to experiment, stumble, and get up again.

The common ingredient in all the recommendations above is…risk! Without risk and vulnerability, meaningful relationships can't happen. Team members won't take risks or be vulnerable with you unless you demonstrate your ability to engage in that work with them.

When this journey takes you to tough places, remember what brought you into risk management in the first place. For most of us, it wasn't a passion for risk registers or algorithms. Humans make risk fascinating. It's an emotional and moral challenge to work with others to identify an organization's vulnerabilities, brainstorm possibilities, and observe how your instincts and training kick in (or don't) when a crisis occurs. Practice being more open as a risk leader now, and new possibilities will open up for your team.

Rachel Sams is a Consultant and Staff Writer at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She would love to hear about the risks you've taken as a manager that paid off (and those that didn't!) Reach her at rachel@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504.