

# *LeaderPerfect Newsletter*

December 15, 2003

## **A Job Done Well: How Do You Know?**

by Dr. Mike Armour

Thirty years ago, in his book *The Ascent of Man*, John Bronowski offered a telling observation: "The most powerful drive in the ascent of man is his pleasure in his own skills. He loves to do what he does well, and having done it well, he loves to do it better."

A similar sentiment guides my approach to executive coaching and leadership development. I believe that most people want to do a good job and want to become even better at it. This, then, raises a particularly important question: "How do you know when you're doing a good job?"

### **Individualized Responses**

Not everyone goes about answering this question the same way. In order to feel confident that they are performing well, some people rely on feedback from peers, supervisors, or customers. The kind of feedback? It differs from person to person. Some consider promotions, perks, and bonuses the best sign that they are doing a good job. Others rely on praise and recognition. Still others depend on results from formal surveys and reports.

There's another group of people who are less concerned with feedback than with measuring their work against some benchmark. For salesmen the benchmark may be a quota. For CEOs it's often hitting bottom-line targets. For students the standard may be progress toward a degree. Individuals like this frequently thrive on tangible goals and objectives.

Then there's another part of the workforce that depends on neither feedback nor benchmarks. When asked how they know they are doing a good job, they refer to an almost mysterious internal sense. "I just know it inside," they say. "I can't explain it, exactly." These are usually people whose self-confidence and motivation are not easily shattered by hostile feedback or the failure to reach targeted goals.

### **One-Dimensional Motivation**

Few leadership roles are more important than helping people feel convinced that they are doing a good job. Without this conviction, productivity is likely to falter, along with morale, effectiveness, and profitability. Sensing such danger, good leaders put a premium on helping people know, collectively and individually, that they are doing well.

Unfortunately, this is one of those places where leadership is sometimes inadvertently one-dimensional. Without consciously reflecting on what they are doing, leaders can act

as though their own method for knowing that they've done a good job is the one that everyone else uses.

To cite a personal example, I'm one of those people who has an internal voice that tells him when he is doing well. I've never needed a lot of external rewards or feedback from other people in order to feel good (or bad) about my performance.

As a leader, this trait has helped me immensely in weathering opposition and criticism, even when the criticism was harsh and unfair. But this aspect of my personality also has a significant downside. From my earliest days in leadership, people around me voiced a repeated complaint: "I'm never sure where I stand with you," they said. "I don't know if you think I'm doing a good job or not."

These words invariably surprised me, for they often came from people whose performance I deemed genuinely stellar.

In time I came to recognize that I was failing others in a fundamental way. Since my own sense of having done a good job relied on an internal voice, not external recognition, I simply acted as though everyone else was equally self-directed. I was giving too little input and recognition to people who, without that feedback, could not feel comfortable about their job performance.

Armed with that recognition, I set out to minimize this "flat side" in my leadership style. For years I've worked to be more timely and purposeful in providing feedback, praise, and recognition. Today I'm much better at it, though far from where I need to be.

## **Ask and Listen**

If you are a leader, always remember that the people who report to you want to do a good job, just as much as you do. And they want to get better at it. They want to be motivated. Each one of them, however, has his or her own way of answering the question, "Am I doing a good job?"

As their leader, do you know how your people individually tackle this question? What gauge do they use in answering it? Do they look to the goals they've met? To the bonuses they've earned? To the recognition they've received before their peers?

If you can't answer these questions, you've sorely handicapped yourself in keeping your people motivated. It's essential to find out what they consider the most important criteria for knowing they are doing well. How, then, do you identify their personal criteria?

It's simple. You ask your people. Individually. This is one of those arenas in which a direct approach usually works magnificently. Here's what to do.

Over the next few weeks make a point of talking one-on-one with people who report to you. Do it in a casual, non-threatening setting. And then, in an almost off-the-cuff manner, merely ask, "How do you know when you're doing a good job?" Most people will give you a fairly straight-forward answer, even if they have to pause and think about it for a few moments.

As you listen to their response, notice whether it matches what you have previously assumed about keeping them motivated. You may well be surprised at how many different ways people go about answering this basic, yet vital question. And you may be equally surprised at how much their way of measuring a "job well done" differs from your own.

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