

Preserving Top Talent An Approach to Leadership Development

By Joelle K. Jay, Ph.D.



“All I do is put out fires all day long. There’s no time for me to actually focus and do my work. It’s all just crisis management, day after day.”

“I’m entirely scattered. My mind is running so fast at any one time, I just fly from one activity to another trying to keep things moving, keeping them in play. I never have time to think.”

“I get points for being a ‘top performer,’ but the truth is I know I’m nowhere near my best. I get results and it’s exciting to see the things we’re doing, but I

know I’m not working at my full potential at this speed. I’m just keeping up. I’m a machine.”

These kinds of comments are becoming increasingly common among talented employees. Today’s workplaces are extremely fast-paced, constantly changing, and ambiguous environments. Certainly we all have to adjust to this new reality, but in the process, talented employees are working themselves into the ground. We want them to keep the pace, but is this really the outcome we’re after: that they never have time to think? That they feel like they’re in crisis? That they’re constantly scattered? That they feel like machines?

If company leaders hope to keep top talent, they are going to have to preserve their most talented employees. Those employees are also going to have to learn to think differently. The kind of thinking and working required in the complex work environments that have come to characterize today’s business settings are more intense than they were in the past. To succeed, employees must learn to be more strategic. More thoughtful. More aligned. Leaders at every level must approach their work with all of the talent they have, for the benefit of the company and for the sustainability of their results.

When leaders and employees discover the value of a more thoughtful approach to leadership, they experience a different day-to-day reality. They take time for the proactive, good strategic thinking that leads them to feel clearer and more settled. They are able to discern the priorities and stay focused on them, and the rest of the busyness just fades into the background.

They are more focused on results. They are better team players. They are aligned to their company vision, their managers' needs and their partners. Best of all, they have time for themselves to rest and renew their energy. Overall, they experience a more committed, results-based approach to work and life that leads to loyalty in a company, better retention, and a better quality of life.

How does one create such an environment? The secret is attending to the individual. Just as corporate leaders must apply the practices and principles of strong leadership to make their company succeed, so must individual employees apply the practices and principles of strong leadership to succeed for themselves. We call it personal leadership, and it's the heart of a high quality way to work.

This article describes an approach to talent development that brings personal leadership to a corporate environment. The practices and principles of the approach can be used by any organization that values and wants to keep their top talent.

A Challenging, Fast-Paced Place to Work

A number of common challenges are making today's companies difficult places to work. To name a few, those challenges include:

1. **Pace.** The pace of change and innovation is exceptional today, especially in companies committed to providing ever-better tools and solutions through ongoing innovation.
2. **Focus.** Add together a creative setting with inventive minds and in an industry known for speed and change, and you'll find the perfect conditions for "bright shiny object" syndrome. It's easy to be distracted.
3. **Empowerment.** Breaking free of outdated management techniques means empowering people to be independent and use their best judgment, so they can work efficiently – a change for many employees used to the old systems of command and control.

To address these challenges, leaders need to do several things at once: identify talented individuals in whom to invest, empower them to take a leadership mindset, teach them to focus on their top priorities, and do so in a way that would be efficient in terms of both cost and time so they can develop themselves as leaders while keeping up with the pace of their business.

For that, they can turn to personal leadership.

Personal Leadership: A Reflective Practice for Business Leaders

Personal leadership is the leadership of the self. The process involves asking yourself, "How do I need to be and act and think in order to be my best?" – a kind of self-driven style well-suited to dedicated leaders and employees who want to succeed for themselves and for the sake of their business.

Practicing personal leadership requires periodically turning away from the concerns of the day – the people, the problems, and the pressure – to explore and discover what's truly important.

To practice personal leadership, you apply the principles of leadership that make businesses a success...to yourself. Leading in business involves having a compelling vision, developing strategies, and inspiring people to use their talents to meet a goal for improved business results.



Leading yourself means applying these same principles of leadership to your role as a leader and your life. You, too, need a compelling vision and a strategy for reaching it. You need a team supporting you. You need results, as well as a sense of contribution and purpose. The difference is that personal leadership doesn't just make for better business, it makes for better leadership. It makes for a better you.

As a leader, you must learn to lead yourself to stay effective. When you practice personal leadership, you use every ounce of your potential with inspiration instead of perspiration, synergy instead of sacrifice, and wisdom instead of work. Personal leadership is so important that renowned management expert Peter Drucker once called it "the only leadership that's going to matter in the 21st century."

It's also a way of helping people succeed at work. It's a philosophy especially well-suited to high-achieving, high-performing talented leaders – those who are so committed to their own success and results that they will do almost anything to attain them. Personal Leadership offers leaders a way to sustain that high level of functioning day after day, and year after year, without sacrificing themselves.

When personal leadership is supported and incorporated into the leadership development efforts of a company, employees gain the opportunity to focus on themselves as leaders, or in other words, to learn to lead themselves toward better results.

Personal Leadership at Work

What might it look like to emphasize personal leadership as a way of preserving top talent? A number of techniques can be woven into existing programs. A few of these are described below: the importance of a vision and goals; the practices of personal leadership; and the delivery of concrete, measurable results.

A Vision and Goals

Personal leadership begins with a vision. Individual employees should be encouraged to develop a clear, specific, holistic vision that helps them align to the things that are most important to them in their lives and at work. Such a vision may incorporate business and performance objectives (sales goals, departmental goals, team goals), and they may also cover other areas of their lives (career goals, health and wellness goals, personal goals).

The Practices of Personal Leadership

Generally speaking, personal leadership is a reflective mindset and an intentional approach to work and life, but a number of specific practices can be taught to help leaders learn the process. Here are just a few.

- **Get Clarity.** Clarity comes from asking the question, What do you want? When you have clarity about what you're trying to achieve, the noise created by competing priorities quiets down.

- **Find Focus.** Focus is about understanding where to put your attention. Focusing has become a precious skill in a world where people feel more and more fractured. Being able to focus means you not only know your vision and goals, you actually prioritize them.
- **Take Action.** High-achieving individuals know how to take action. In some cases, they are doing, doing, doing so much at every moment, they barely have time to think. By moving the action after a clear sense of vision and after focusing on priorities, action becomes much more targeted.
- **Tap Into Your Brilliance.** The ability to tap into your brilliance is about knowing what's unique about you, and being able to leverage it so you bring your best strengths and talents to bear on your efforts to get the best results.
- **Maximize Your Time.** Make no mistake: talented high-achievers want to make the most of every moment. This practice asks the question, How can you achieve more with less? By learning to maximize your time, you can succeed without the stress.

Personal leadership practices such as these walk program members down a path to their vision and goals. More importantly, they provide a process one can use over and over again on the lifelong path of high achievement.

Concrete, Measureable Results

The goal of incorporating personal leadership into leadership development efforts is not for employees to master the practices, but to improve business results while at the same time supporting the well-being of the leaders who get those results.

We call them concrete, measurable results – the kind of results that actually drive a business forward.

Sometimes those results are deliverables for members' work goals. Perhaps they include an increase in employee engagement scores, an improvement in customer satisfaction, or better productivity for a team.

Sometimes those results are career-related. They might include a promotion, a new opportunity, or a special assignment.

Sometimes those results are personal. Examples include better work/life balance, higher quality relationships, and better health.

Most likely, members' results include all three. When you practice personal leadership at work and in your life, you gain positive results in every area of your goals. In short, you reach your vision for success plus quality of life.

By establishing a personal vision and goals and then applying the practices of personal leadership to achieve concrete, measureable results, companies that instill an ethic of personal leadership help their employees achieve a variety of impressive outcomes.

"I am certainly thinking more about what I am doing," said one employee at a company that promoted personal leadership as a way of supporting its employees.

Another reported, “I am paying more attention to the development of others on my team. I am more effective.”

Closing Thoughts

Talented employees in many organizations are at risk. When companies build personal leadership into leadership development programs, many more leaders will be able to approach their work with a sustainable sense of self and satisfaction. Then rather than feeling scattered and burned out, they will be able to contribute their full potential to their organizations, with benefits for themselves at work and in life.

Then we will hear more leaders talking about the successes at work instead of the challenges.

“I love my work. It’s a good feeling to know that every day I bring my strengths to my role. By doing what I do best, I am able to help my team deliver on the projects and initiatives that make a difference to the company, and at the same time, I feel invigorated and inspired. It’s an exciting time to be in business, where there is so much change and possibility. I’m grateful that I can be a part of it – using my talents, getting results and enjoying myself along the way.”



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