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The Secret To Attaining The Best Leaders: Support The Ones You Already Have

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Steve Carnegie had survived. In the political jungle that his organization had become, he had come through the danger zone into the clearing. He had suffered a disgruntled workforce, an unethical false accusation, an investigation into several employees' questionable work practices, the angry aftermath among his employees and a rash of resignations, firings and early retirements. Along with his HR business partner and supportive senior executives, Steve had made it through his division's toughest year ever.

Now the question was, would *he* stay at his company to help it get back on track?

When I met Steve, the rebuilding was over. His division had been cleared of its challenges, and it was time for a fresh new start. But it wasn't clear whether Steve himself was ready. His confidence was shot. His workforce's reputation had to be repaired, and he would have to build up the department from scratch, with new employees, a new culture and a new vision.

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It wasn't clear whether Steve had suffered so many blows that he would be the one to get his division back into good standing. At least, that's what he thought.

Fortunately, Steve was surrounded by executives who saw how vulnerable he had become. They put their heads together and agreed that they had to do everything they could to restore Steve. Steve, they knew, was a talented, committed professional with extensive expertise—a valuable leader to the organization, and one they wanted to retain.

With as much support as they could muster, Steve's manager and HR business partner approached him with the idea of getting him an executive coach. Hesitant at first, he gingerly agreed. Month by month, I worked with Steve to put into place the elements of the “new division” until one day, nine months later, his manager beamed and declared Steve “our biggest leadership success story.”

In order to retain top leadership talent, his company focused on three key elements: internal support, resources and a process for tracking results.

A Clear Expression Of Support

When I originally heard Steve's situation, I could see immediately how vulnerable he must feel. Someone without the right information might misinterpret the challenges in his department to have been his fault. They were not. In fact, Steve was the solution to its most serious problems—a leader who was finally able to root out the detractors and poor performers, stand up to the political pressures and clear house for the sake of the company. The fact that his managers and business partners were able to see through the drama to the leader Steve was being for the company was significant.

So was their conscientiousness in getting him a coach. They knew they wanted to preserve this talented leader, and they didn't leave his success to chance. The fact that Steve's managers hired a coach symbolized an important message to Steve: we value you, we want you to succeed and we want you to stay.

The Right Resources

What Steve needed was a confidential, supportive, sustained, focused and customized environment in which he could think clearly about the road ahead and get busy building it— exactly what coaching is meant to provide.

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A takeaway from Steve's success story might be that companies do well to have a variety of resources teed up and ready to share with their leaders when they need them. Steve was fortunate that the newest executive to be hired in their HR department was familiar with executive coaching and proposed it as a solution. Before she arrived, his company had never used an executive coach. Now, though, in part as a result of Steve's success, the company has developed a process for getting employees the right coach at the right time, as well as a variety of other resources all designed to help them leverage their talents and get the best results.

A Process For Tracking Results

As a coach, I recognize that the entire coaching process can sometimes seem hidden. What's going on in all those closed-door meetings, anyway? How are company leaders supposed to know if coaching is ever really worth the cost?

In Steve's case, he needed to know he could focus on what *he* needed to achieve to get his back, not just what his manager or HR Business partner *thought* he should improve.

On the other hand, Steve's supporters needed to know that Steve was *also* spending time in the areas they knew would be important for Steve's and his division's success. How to do both?

I worked with Steve to develop clear, specific, detailed and explicitly confidential goals for coaching, and we also identified the deliverables that would be considered in determining the success of the process. In this way, company leaders were able to turn the coaching process over to Steve and me with trust and confidence that the investment would be worth the cost, and Steve could step into the coaching process with a healthy and balanced sense of trust and accountability.

Final Thoughts

In the end, Steve far exceeded any expectations his managers had for his coaching, to say nothing of the impressive strides his department made in the one year he participated in coaching. He not only built his division back up but also ensured their standing as the industry leader. He had earned a reputation for excellence and courage in leadership and, best of all, he was feeling once again at the top of his game.

Reflecting on the experience, Steve's manager seemed almost surprised at how well it had all turned out. "When I think about it," she said, "It really couldn't have been more dire. Steve could have easily been a casualty of the difficulties in his department. Instead, he's one of our biggest success stories."

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As so many leaders in companies everywhere debate the best ways to win in the marketplace, Steve's story adds one important point to consider. Sometimes, attaining the very best leaders simply means supporting the ones you already have.



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