

Investing in people at Alameda Alliance for Health

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When other leaders opted for layoffs and furloughs to combat the recession, Ingrid Lamirault called for reinforcements.

"It didn't make sense to make wholesale changes in the employees," says the CEO of Alameda Alliance for Health. "They knew what they were doing and, more importantly, they understood our mission. It made more sense to bring in someone to support the organization. This was about making people see their own potential, boosting people's self-confidence and helping people understand how to behave corporately."

Lamirault hired a business coach, bringing Anna Scott on board to develop some of the 130 employees at the nonprofit managed care health plan, which had \$227.5 million in revenue for the fiscal year ending in June 2010.

"If you're going to develop somebody, it really sends a positive message to the company as a whole that they value their people," Scott says. "It really helps the morale. It develops loyalty by the employees (because they see), 'This company is investing in me and helping me grow.'"

Initially, Lamirault picked several employees with untapped potential.

"I recognized that there were some people I could promote, but they would need support in the beginning, because they'd never supervised a team of people before," she says. "There were other people who had a really good work skill but they ran into a lot of interpersonal conflict. There were a couple who had really good potential, but they would make mistakes and wallow in them instead of learning from them."

You may not be able to forecast someone's potential but, as Scott says, you can tell when employees are getting in their own way of growing.

"Danny," for example, was a high-level employee in the Alliance's IT department. He was good at his job but didn't handle interpersonal conflict well. On top of that, Lamirault worried Danny wouldn't get any further in his field without a college degree. She suggested he attend both coaching and college.

"It's not that he doesn't have interpersonal conflict anymore, but he handles it in a very healthy way," she says. "If someone's not respecting him, he knows how to deal very directly and tell them that this is what he feels and this is what he thinks he brings to the project."

When you approach those employees with the coaching opportunity, you have to frame it as just that – an opportunity. It's not an assignment or a requirement.

"It's a positive," Scott says. "It's a way to say, 'I really believe in you, and we see that you have something to offer. We also see that there are ways that you're getting beside yourself and we want to help you.' It has to be mutual. (We) want to invest, but if they are not interested, (we) won't force it on somebody."

Coaching relationships at the Alliance begin with manager-imposed goals to help employees perform their jobs better. But you can't separate your business initiatives from their personal motives.

"I get really clear about, 'Here's what Ingrid has said she'd like you to develop,'" Scott says. "Then I go, 'What would make it worth it to have you do this? What else do you see in yourself that you would like to develop?' It's one thing to do something for somebody else, but when you've got your own skin in the game, (you're) more willing to fully participate."

"If they don't do those things that Ingrid wants, bottom line is, they're not going to have a job. But if they're not satisfied with who they are and what they're achieving, they won't do a very good job. By being able to focus both at the same time, people are so much more satisfied. When people are struggling in their personal lives, work really does suffer."

What's in it for you?

Investing in employees strengthens the overall organization, but who would have thought your leadership skills would benefit from the effort? Ingrid Lamirault, CEO of Alameda Alliance for Health, learned that when she focuses attention on her employees, she reaps some benefits herself.

"Anna had started telling people to be more direct and to say what they feel," Lamirault says, referencing Anna Scott, who coaches her employees one-on-one. "It makes me have to speak very directly with them or she'll tell me, 'You seem to have some indecision about some changes you're making, and it's making people very nervous.'"

"A couple of times, she's told me the way I'm handling something is creating turmoil so it's made me recognize how I need to improve my own leadership skills. It makes me aware of some of the language that I use. And so ... I have changed, too."

Be conscious of how you can grow along with your employees, because their development doesn't happen in a vacuum removed from your leadership.

"No action is by itself," Scott says. "If I'm not being clear, then my employee will not produce the results I want. If I'm leading and I need you to do something, then it behooves me to go, 'What is it that I need to do to be effective with you?'"

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