

Building bench strength

Encouraging reports to think like leaders is not just good business—it also accelerates your agenda and simplifies your life.

By Jackie Sloane

When you build the talent around you in real-time as part of the everyday way you do business, it can energize and significantly impact your contribution. I know people who've turned around organizations, and exponentially grown client relationships, building bench strength in this way.

I learned this earlier in my own business, working with a team of paid journalism interns from Northwestern. Creative and industrious juniors and seniors, they sought real-world business understanding of marketing communications. I had them do research, draft news releases, and think from the point of view of the client. Even as I asked them to take on mundane tasks as part of the assignment, I shared clients' challenges and goals in firm strategy meetings. I did this so these young people would learn to think like partners, rather than gofers; understand the importance of their roles; and learn as much as possible from working with me. They loved it and brought a great deal of energy and commitment to everything they did, often contributing original ideas that we wound up using and finding more effective ways to get things done. It was fun and productive for everyone involved. Many years later, I still connect with them, some now in journalism, law, academia or business.

When leaders know how to engage the creativity of those around them and build talent, also known as bench strength, they

become more innovative and effective, more influential, and in greater demand in their organizations. Leadership is a learning process. Each day brings new challenges, and what worked perfectly yesterday may not work as well today. We improve as leaders when we help others learn to think like leaders, and the process of articulating our thinking helps us identify gaps and assumptions we hadn't seen.

To grow your people—and your effectiveness—look for opportunities to share your strategic thinking. Seek out the ideas of reports, and provide them with learning opportunities that include communication benchmarks. And be willing to hear questions, push-back and to learn!

Tips for making the most of your talent:

- **Make sure people understand the exact outcome you want to achieve, as well as the overall strategic goal of any project you hand off to them.** How certain are you that your reports know what really matters to you and how they can impact your agenda? I coach enough talented leaders and those who report to top leadership to know this is not made clear often enough! And before you make a request, spend a few minutes thinking about what you want. What would success look like? If the task is for a client, what is the ultimate goal—and yours? Get everyone thinking about the bigger picture as well as the details, so they can improvise and improve as needed. They will be less apt to make errors when they understand what's important. I once worked with a leader who was



Resources

Power Up: *Transforming Organizations Through Shared Leadership*, by David L. Bradford and Alan R. Cohen (Wiley, 1998). Written by foundational leadership thinkers at Stanford University, this book will help you understand your role in creating an environment that accelerates what you want to achieve—and what you might be doing that gets in the way.

Execution: *The Discipline of Getting Things Done*, by Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan (Crown Business, 2002). Essential reading that will support you in challenging the thinking of others, this book helps you ask the right questions and have the critical conversations that can mean the difference between achieving your desired result and failing to do so.



notorious for vague requests, and he was often bitterly dissatisfied with the results. He learned to understand his role and to think through his exact goal before enlisting help—and his team learned to ask a lot more questions before acting. Their working relationships were transformed, and they were all much more pleased with the outcome of their efforts.

• **Use daily challenges as learning opportunities.**

Whenever your team completes a project or misses an important deadline, use the opportunity to learn and develop leadership thinking. Guide a discussion: Don't try to figure everything out yourself ahead of time. Share any concerns and ask a simple question: What worked? Listen, then ask clarifying questions. Take notes (or ask someone else to take notes). Then ask: How could we improve? How can we use what we just learned to be better at what we do? Use these insights to improve the system. Ask people to take on tasks and monitor issues.

• **Give people what they need to succeed, including clear timelines for reporting to you about progress.** If you must have something completed by Friday at 10, ask for a progress report or a draft by Wednesday before 11. Make sure you get it. Encourage questions. Provide clear feedback on what you hear.

Even if you've inherited people you may not have selected, they can surprise you if you give them the opportunity. **ET**

JACKIE SLOANE is an executive coach who specializes in expanding leaders' ability to contribute through how they and their teams communicate, delegate, engage others and cultivate relationships.