

TEACHING AN OLD DOG NEW TRICKS

By Marilyn Thiet

Can you teach an old dog new tricks? I say yes, but only if the old dog is open to learning. And nothing makes a dog more open than a treat or reward for changing, evolving, learning. But what about “old” leaders, those whose age we measure not in chronological years but in their resistance to change or evolve as a leader? Will they change, even with the promise of reward? Those of us in business today know that change is a constant and we have all had to evolve, especially technologically. In today’s era of digital communication, Same Time chats and Web-Ex type meetings are the norm for collaborating with our partners around the globe. Gone are the days of the pink slips with hand written telephone messages or business letters that arrive via the postal service. Change has brought us the reward of being able to communicate more quickly, conduct business faster, and become more productive and profitable. So like the proverbial “dog”, we’ve learned new tricks.

But have we applied that willingness to change to our leadership style? Do we know what the rewards are for changing and evolving as a leader? Are they tangible enough for us to make the effort to evolve our leadership approaches and style to match the needs of today’s employees, especially the growing numbers of millennials in the workforce? For those leaders who are not able to see those rewards they will remain stuck in a pattern of behavior that may have worked 10 years ago but will not work today. Today’s workforce expects their leaders to provide feedback and coaching, give them challenging assignments, provide them opportunities for advancement, and allow them flexibility in how and when they approach their work. And in return they will produce high quality work that leads to profitability at record rates.

Unlike generations before us who believed they had to “stick it out” with a company until it was time to retire with a gold watch in hand, today’s workforce expects to work for multiple companies throughout their career. If they do not get the things they need from their leader, they will leave. In a study by Manpower International in developed countries worldwide, the average length of tenure for a millennial was found to be 18 months and the number one reason they left is that they did not feel appreciated and were not engaged with their leader and company. “Let them leave” is the response I’ve heard from some, those unwilling to change their approach to retain the millennial employees. Given the American Management Association’s estimate that replacing an employee costs a company 3-5 times that employee’s annual salary, it is highly unlikely that approach will be tolerated or sustainable financially. Can you afford to turnover your workforce every 18 months? Retaining good employees and maintaining profitability should be reward enough for leaders to make the effort to evolve their style to match that of their workforce.

So as leaders how do we evolve our leadership styles to match the demands today? An awareness of the need to change is the first step. Admitting that what served us well yesterday will not serve us tomorrow or in the future. Talking to our employees, understanding what motivates them, what they need and want out of their jobs and finding a way to provide that is the second step. Changing the way we communicate, providing feedback (positive and constructive), being open to new ideas and new ways to do business are all positive steps in the right direction.

What changes do you need to make to lead in tomorrow's world?

"If you don't like change, you're going to like irrelevance even less."

~ General Eric Shinseki