

Personalized Leadership in a Virtual World

By Mohamed Bahelwan

Being part of a global services team for many years, I had to engage virtual teams located in every corner of the world. Seeing the wide spectrum of diverse backgrounds, I am frequently asked: how do you build a motivating personal relationship with such teams? Hence this article!

First of all, I am an evangelist when it comes to humane and personalized leadership. I refute that anemic idea of *'it's nothing personal, it's just business'*. Of course it's personal! Although a bloody one, business after all remains to be a human sport. As long as we have hearts pumping and souls yearning, business will always be personal.

Now of course, I absolutely do not mean that managers sob with every employee going through a rough time. But I learned that leadership has evolved from a title-driven concept, to a rather more relationship-driven one. We follow leaders that touch us emotionally, rather than solely hierarchically. From an employee perspective, he/she would not feel as that expendable office tool that is commandeered to sustain high performance. From a leader's perspective, a little personalization helps leaders comprehend what inspires each person in his/her team. Not everyone is alike; we each have different motivational factors.

And again, one cannot fake sincerity all the time. Every one of us, knowingly or unknowingly, has an internal bullshit indicator. Teams spend roughly 50-hour workweeks interacting with each other. So take it from me, whatever masks you'll try to hide behind, all your facades will chatter eventually.

Genuine personal connections on the other hand are built in the trenches! When teams share the same bullet-riddled ditch, special personal relationships are welded. It is those ironclad bonds that spark trust, motivation, loyalty, and perseverance within an organization. Needless to say, these traits will eventually reflect on the bottom line.

Now, back to our question: In today's globalized and virtual corporate context, how can any leader cultivate a personal relationship with each individual in his/her team? Here are three simple tips I picked up along the way:

1) Cómo Estás?

At 1963, JFK gave that ever-famous speech to a standing crowd of 450,000 West Berliners. Out of that 10-minute speech, the words that captivated the crowd were *"Ich bin ein Berliner"* (I am a Berliner). JFK's Boston accent didn't matter; the political ramifications were irrelevant. Yet, those simple German words were the magical connection. A phrase that personalized the relationship between the German crowd and their American president. Were these same words spoken in English, they would have not echoed through history.

Even in today's global village of a world, language still remains a powerful tool. There is a reason why most universities and retailers have multi-lingual greetings splashed all over their entrances. It is an excellent resonator to signify a message of inclusivism and accommodation. Reading that *'welcome'* sign in your own language makes you feel personally connected to that establishment.

On that same notion, as a leader, use each individual's language to connect with members of your team. Obviously, you do not need to study the entire linguistics of a language. However, just 1 or 2 phrases would go a very very long way to build a fast personal rapport. During my tenure, I had the pleasure of leading individuals

from a wide scope of nationalities. A simple ‘*Namaste!*’ or ‘*Cómo Estás?*’ broke the ice so fast; you would think we were colleagues for years. As unpretentious and trivial as it sounds, it works! Try it with your own team! It’s a human genome to relate with people that share a commonality. What better way to connect than sharing the same language!

2) Family Love

To further connect with your team, you need empathy. To know their worries, fears, outlooks, etc. In short, what keeps them awake at night? To that effect, family takes precedence over everything. If you have a sick mother, the job drops way down in the list of priorities. That’s not a lack of professionalism or commitment; it is rather a juggling of life’s curve balls.

Building on that premise, as a leader, be sure to know the names of your team’s family members and the circumstances they go through. These simple initiatives show that you think of your team as human beings, rather than just KPI tools.

Go ahead! Ask your subordinate how his son’s soccer tryout went, or how her husband’s surgery went. I guarantee you these simple questions do resonate emotionally, as well as have a huge impact when building trust within a team.

3) Sea Salt Smells Better than a Corner Office

There is that status quo idea that personal and career goals are mutually exclusive. Or that ‘Work-life balance’ needs to be enriched in organizations. As if work and life are two competing entities struggling to eat up your existence. I think its high-time corporations break that paradigm.

LuLuLemon has an interesting cultural HR policy. They relate to employee dreams when setting resource performance targets, career paths, annual reviews, etc. LuLulemon brand ambassadors talk life vision instead of profession. Unsurprisingly, that cultivated employee attitude is paying off. From someone that experienced it first hand, Lululemon’s customer service is nothing short of first class.

In any context, most followers relate to leaders that inspire them with a personal aspiration. Humans in general love thinking their jobs would make their dreams come true. The good news is that most people are realistic. Not everyone dreams of being an astronaut! Nevertheless, many of us dream of retiring on that simple seafront home on an island back home.

This is where leader’s shine! Relate to your team’s personal seafront homes. Make them smell the sea salt every day. Talk to them about their dreams every chance you get. Construct it as an anchor point for every work task they are accountable for. At the end, we take solace in believing that every step we make, is a step closer to an envisioned utopic destination.

That’s it! Three simple daily habits that go a long way: Greet them in their language, relate to their family worries, and anchor the job with a big-pictured dream. Try them the next time around! Hope they work for you the same way they worked for me.

Goodluck!