advice chief

Big-time leaders solve big-time problems

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If you've ascended to a high level of leadership in an organization, the only problems being placed on your desk should be big problems that others could not solve. If you're solving every little problem in the organization for others who possess the appropriate pay grade to solve them, you're destined for an early grave. And when you end up six feet under, it won't be long before the organization is belly up as well. So if you are truly caught up in solving way too many problems, it's time to get your people on board with solving the majority of their own problems.

One thing I've learned about problems is that solving *task* problems is much easier than solving *people* problems. You can adjust processes or rearrange action steps quickly to solve task problems, but when your people can't figure out those adjustments or rearrangements on their own, then you will be solving task problems every day, and that is not where you should be spending the majority of your time. If this is your situation, then the real problem is your people. You have to turn them into problem solvers. This can be done in the following manner:

1) Make a time commitment to develop people. Those who never take time to develop people are forced to take time to solve their problems.

2) Never solve a problem for a person; solve it with them. Take that individual through the problem-solving process of properly identifying the problem, prioritizing it if necessary, defining it, selecting people to help, figuring out possible causes, making a list of possible solutions, prioritizing and selecting the best solution, implementing the solution, evaluating the solution, and then setting up principles or policies to keep the problem from recurring.

Ideally, problems should be solved at the lowest level possible. But when they become big in scope and far-reaching, they often end up in your lap. President Eisenhower gave President Kennedy this advice the day before his inauguration: "You'll find no easy problems ever come to the President of the United States. If they are easy to solve, somebody else has solved them." That statement should be true of every leader. Climbing the ladder of leadership means that you will make fewer but more important decisions with each step up. Your problem-solving skills must be sharpened because every decision at that level becomes a major decision.

Under excellent leadership, though, a problem seldom reaches gigantic proportions because it is recognized and fixed in its early stages. Great leaders usually recognize a problem in the following sequence:

1) They sense it before they see it.

2) They begin looking for it and ask questions.

3) They gather data.

4) They share their feelings and findings to a few trusted colleagues.

5) They define the problem.

6) They check their resources.

7) They make a decision.

Great leaders are seldom blindsided. They realize that the punch that knocks them out is seldom the hard one--it's the one they didn't see coming. Therefore, they are always looking for signs and indicators that will give them insight into the problem ahead so their odds of fixing it are in their favor. They treat problems like the potential trespasser of an Indiana farm who reads the following message on a fence post: "If you cross this field you better do it in 9.8 seconds. The bull can do it in 10 seconds."

It's time to start letting your people figure out how they can get across that field in 9.8 seconds. You can then focus your time and effort on figuring out how to eliminate the bull, or perhaps to relocate and cross fields in another state! If you're a big-time leader, you should be solving big-time problems.

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