

Balancing leadership and followership in pursuit of productive workplaces



While leaders are expected to steer the corporate ship and make executive decisions in their organisations, employees – by the same token – need to consider some accountability for the roles they fulfil.

It takes a partnership of leaders and employees to make a success of an organisation, with both playing equally vital but different roles in building productive companies. That said, most present-day interventions tend to focus more on leaders in the workplace – and the attributes they need to lead as well as their obligation to create enabling environments – without a lot of attention being paid to what employees need to bring to the party.

In this article, I invite employees to step up, enjoy the agency they are afforded by their leaders and help take the company forward. This invitation to employees is on condition that their leaders are indeed effective, enabling and consistent in their expectations, and genuinely inspire the achievement of organisational goals.

Take personal ownership of their role in the organisation

In response to effective leadership, employees need to pause and ask themselves: “what is my contribution, how do I add value in achieving the organisation’s goals?” This personal ownership on the part of the employee transcends the transactional relationship of simply providing set hours for a pay cheque.

Employees also need to ask themselves whether what they are being tasked to do is aligned with what they themselves want to achieve for themselves. If the answer is “no”, then they are unlikely to be fully

engaged and leaders will find it hard to inspire them. In this instance, employees need to muster the courage to say “maybe this is not my occupational home” and pursue a better suited role elsewhere. That said, it must be acknowledged that there are limitations in South Africa’s job market. If employees choose to stay, instead of reluctantly showing up to do the bare minimum in their places of employ, they need to be intentional about finding purpose and some value in their roles. Luckily, human beings have been gifted with something known as neuroplasticity – the brain’s ability to adjust, adapt and find value in a scenario that might not be one’s choice. Neuroplasticity enables the brain to shift structurally and functionally and may allow employees to even find some purpose in what they’re doing, thereby staying engaged and relatively positive.

Share feedback in a constructive way

When employees have the courage to share feedback in a constructive manner and through appropriate channels, they make it easier for effective leaders to adjust their approach and ways of working.

However, when employees withhold their feedback or simply voice concerns amongst themselves, they place the organisation and their leaders on the back foot and undermine efforts to maintain an enabling environment.

Hold peers accountable

It is not sustainable to only look to the leader to hold everyone accountable. Of course, it forms part of the leader’s role, but to create an environment of collective ownership, where employees feel like they co-own various responsibilities with the leader, everyone needs to be accountable.

If employees notice that a colleague is complaining incessantly, arriving late or being sluggish, it is in everyone’s interest to approach the colleague, respectfully voice that they have noticed a pattern, enquire about that colleague’s wellbeing and ask what can be done to help resolve the issue.

Don’t only raise issues, also offer possible solutions

There is often an expectation that effective leaders should resolve every issue in the workplace. This is not a sustainable approach, especially when those who are more operationally involved may have excellent suggestions on what needs to be done to overcome a challenge.

Merely being issues-focused reinforces the sometimes destructive power relations of a parent-child relationship between leader and employee. Rather, employees should consider approaching their leaders with recognition of the leader’s positional authority, but engaging with them as equal co-creators of great work, thereby giving leaders the space to treat them as equals too.

This can help repair the pervasive rift between one who is “all knowing and all powerful” and one who is “just following instructions without engaging”. By approaching the leader with potential solutions, employees are indicating that they are engaged and ready to make a difference.

Our brains know the difference

From a neuroscience perspective, when a partnership of equals exists between leaders and followers, an

atmosphere of trust is created. When trust is in the mix, our brains release oxytocin, commonly referred to as “the trust hormone”. Work relations are thus lubricated by this. So, while employees ideally should not be friends with the leader, they can have a mutually respectful relationship and be united in achieving common outcomes. As employees make inroads into 2025 and reflect on whether they are on a path to realising their personal hopes and dreams, it’s important that they be honest with themselves and find ways to make a meaningful contribution in the roles they find themselves in. To avoid doing so is not sustainable for their mental health or for the health of the businesses they work for.