E. | The Knowledge Garden ™

BY THE ELLE OFFICE

Every leader teaches—even unintentionally.

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ELLE PERSPECTIVE / 03 · ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE

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Every leader teaches—even unintentionally.

A leader answers a question, responds to a mistake, receives disagreement, or hears a concern.

On the surface, it may seem like one interaction that simply needs to be managed. But the interaction is doing more than addressing the issue at hand. Simultaneously, the employee is learning.

They are learning what happens when they ask a question. What disagreement sounds like under this leadership. Whether a mistake can be acknowledged and corrected or whether it will continue to follow them. Whether bringing forward a concern creates understanding or creates another problem.

Not every lesson is intentional.

A leader may say, “My door is always open.”

Then an employee walks through it.

If the concern is met with defensiveness, dismissal, or a change in how the employee is treated afterward, the employee has received two different messages.

The stated message was that their voice was welcome.

The experienced lesson was that using it may have consequences.

The same is true in the other direction.

A leader who listens with thoughtful consideration teaches something. A leader who can address a mistake without humiliating the person who made it teaches something. A leader who explains why a standard matters teaches something.

The response teaches.

People adapt to what they learn.

Diverse personalities, communication styles, expectations, and ways of thinking naturally require people to adapt to one another. That kind of adaptation is part of working effectively in a healthy work environment.

The concern begins when adaptation requires someone to suppress constructive parts of themselves in order to function within the organization.

An employee who would normally engage may become quiet. Someone who naturally asks questions may begin keeping them to themselves. A person who readily helps coworkers work through problems may become reluctant to step in.

That doesn’t necessarily mean the person has fundamentally changed.

They may have learned that being that version of themselves in this environment comes with a cost. That experience becomes information they carry into the next decision to ask, speak, disagree, admit a mistake, or bring forward a concern.

Change itself is not necessarily a concern. Growth is change. The difference is whether the change is developing something in the person or teaching them to suppress something constructive.

The lesson can travel.

Often, employees learn how to interact with a leader partly by experiencing how that leader interacts with them—and others.

When those interactions are witnessed by colleagues, the lesson reaches beyond the person directly involved.

They may notice that the coworker who once readily helped others has become more reserved.

They may begin wondering what happens when they ask a similar question.

They may adjust too.

Those coworkers may not know what happened before or afterward. But they have received information they did not have before.

The leader is human too.

None of this makes leadership solely responsible for every working relationship.

Employees have agency. They may misunderstand an interaction, resist appropriate accountability, behave disrespectfully, or bring expectations formed under previous leadership into a new working relationship.

Leaders also learn from repeated interactions.

A leader may become more cautious with an employee who has repeatedly shown poor judgment. They may document more carefully after trust has been damaged. They may adjust how they manage someone after experience has shown that a different approach is necessary.

The relationship is reciprocal, even though the authority within it is not equal.

That is why patterns deserve examination rather than immediate conclusions.

One difficult relationship may be an isolated situation. When the same response begins appearing across multiple relationships, it deserves a closer look.

Not automatic self-blame.

Self-evaluation.

Good leaders ask before assuming.

A normally engaged employee becomes quieter.

They stop volunteering information. They answer what is asked but offer little beyond it. They no longer seem like the person leadership is accustomed to seeing.

It can be easy to decide that the employee's attitude has changed.

Maybe it has.

But a change in behavior is information, not necessarily the explanation.

The reason may have nothing to do with work. The team dynamic may have changed. An interaction with leadership may have affected how the employee now chooses to engage.

Leadership does not have to assume which explanation is correct.

It can ask.

A genuine check on an employee's wellbeing can create room for a conversation that an assumption would have closed.

That is part of leadership as well.

It also teaches something: I noticed.

Acknowledgment matters.

Sometimes self-evaluation reveals that leadership did contribute to the problem.

Good leadership does not require pretending that did not happen.

A leader can acknowledge that an interaction was handled poorly, that an assumption was wrong, or that their approach created an effect they did not intend.

Acknowledgment does not remove authority. It does not eliminate standards. It does not mean every employee interpretation must be accepted as fact.

It demonstrates that accountability can move in more than one direction.

We are human.

Mistakes happen. What matters is how we respond, what we learn, and what we do differently afterward.

An employee can be held accountable and still be given room to move forward. A leader can acknowledge getting something wrong and still remain responsible for leading.

The acknowledgment also becomes a lesson for the room: being human and being accountable can exist in the same workplace.

Every leader teaches.

Through what they model. What they tolerate. What they correct. What they acknowledge. How they respond when things are difficult. How they respond when they are the one who got something wrong.

Some lessons are spoken.

Others are learned through experience.

And sometimes a leader does not realize what they have been teaching until the lesson begins showing up in the people around them.

CONSIDER THIS

A leader may think they are managing one interaction. How often are they actually teaching the room?

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