

Case Study

Command-and-Control Leader Builds Empathy & Trusted Relationships

Client Profile

- Director of Product at mid-size software company
- Leadership coaching for five months bi-weekly, with initial interview-based feedback from boss, peers and direct reports
- Goal setting and progress reporting with VP of Product and HR

Background

Client was a highly intelligent and successful performer. One of his superpowers was his strategic mindset and a persistent push for clarity on goals and alignment on the “why.” He was driven, decisive, direct and unafraid to challenge the status quo. He needed to embrace and employ new ways of collaborating cross-functionally and developing his team. In this high-growth company, collaborating and developing talent on his team were keys to continued business success.

Client’s Testimonial

“I really can’t imagine a better coach. Rebecca’s communication is clear – likely she adjusts it based on the needs of the person being coached – but for me it is direct, transparent, purposeful – all the things I value. Working with Rebecca I never felt judged. With some retrospection I can imagine some other coaches might have responded differently – what do you mean you don’t understand WHY you need to empathize? Are you a psychopath? So thankfully Rebecca never reported me to the authorities...I think we always managed to have a good laugh about my gaps.”

Coaching Focus

Areas and Results

(Excerpts from Coaching Progress Report)

Team Development

Accomplishments

- Actively removed myself from meetings. Created a how/process framework so team has something to lean on as I deliberately step back. Catching myself if/when taking the reins and remembering to step back, coach and guide them rather than driving. *Results:* Each of my direct reports are taking the reins on their products.
- Practiced asking open-ended questions in group and team meetings. Previously I would have stated my opinion to keep a discussion moving or on track. Now, rather than giving my answer, I’m deliberately asking questions to redirect or engage others. *Results:* I’m teaching and coaching rather than telling. Others feel valued and heard. Engagement is increasing.
- Coached member of my team to help them see why they need to pay more attention to empathy and collaboration. I started with what they are really good at and we uncovered items they see as a strength. I shared my own resistance to the cost/value of collaboration and that we must internalize our WHY. *Results:* This person has since taken steps to find their why and has been asking (based on my help) for direct feedback.
- Helped new hires drive evangelism more – to connect the dots in terms of big picture and strategy. *Results:* When engineers want to know “where do I fit in this?” every product manager will be able to communicate the why, understand it’s importance, and do this at higher frequency.

Communication

Accomplishments

- Dramatically shifted my focus away from task/execution and instead working more on building relationships and a foundation of trust. Realized that it can take time for people to know/trust me so paying careful attention to the relationship is vital. Practiced meeting with people for the purpose of relationship and collaboration rather than a particular outcome. *Results:* People light up and are brighter in the conversation. There is more of a natural flow to the conversation and they come to the “why” in a more clear way. I don’t have to direct them to it.
- Started to apply this collaboration-based approach in 1-1 scenarios working with peers. Shift to understanding I’m not going to be doing all the work. Deliberately asking questions and listening to what they care about and what they value as a way to understand their strengths and see how we might leverage each other’s strengths. *Results:* Both parties have more collaboration and trust, capacity is increased. So far, it’s working with [peer] and I’m gradually building with two other peers. Collaboration is increasing.
- Realized that my strength is to challenge but this can be overdone and it does not scale. Being a leader means having to rely on others. Consciously working toward helping more than challenging. *Results:* People seem to feel less threatened and it’s easier for us reach alignment on purpose and process. I’m able to empathize with others who might find going outside their strengths both difficult and uncomfortable because I’ve had to go outside my comfort zone and do what’s difficult for me.