

SIGMA

Leadership Series



Involving Direct Reports



GREAT LEADERS INVOLVE DIRECT REPORTS

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To profit from good advice requires more wisdom than to give it.

– Wilson Mizner

In the traditional organizational structure, companies have a few leaders selected to assign, oversee, and evaluate the work of many employees. They are often required to decide who does which task in which way, while expecting exemplary performance from each employee. As the world of work is changing, so is this model of top-down leadership. Organizations have begun to recognize the value in including employees in the decisions that impact their day-to-day lives. Employees who feel more autonomous and self-directed in their work are more likely to be motivated and productive in their work¹. Specifically, employees who feel respected by and involved in their organization are more likely to be committed to their company, work harder, feel more satisfied, and experience fewer feelings of wanting to exit their organization².

Involving direct reports is the process through which leaders consult with direct reports, solicit suggestions, and take these suggestions seriously. To be an effective tool for leaders, the key component of involving direct reports is the term *process*. Asking for input rarely or inconsistently may appear insincere or opportunistic. To gain the trust and respect of employees, it must be fostered over time with consistent and sustained effort. Involving employees in decision-making and the daily operations of a unit can benefit both employees and the organization, and is crucial in cultivating trust between employees and leaders.

In assessing your ability to involve your direct reports, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I appreciate the value of including employees?
- Do I foster trust between myself and my employees?
- Have I created an environment where direct reports feel safe to share their concerns?
- Am I making the effort to ask employees for their input?
- Do I keep employees informed of developments that impact their work or life?
- What is my track record with implementing employee suggestions?

Improve Your Ability to Involve Direct Reports

Understand the process: Employee input, voice, and involvement in the workplace has been studied in many contexts and under many definitions. The important message to take away is that involving employees in the organization does not take one form. They may get involved by

voicing their issues or concerns that they feel have been unheard, or by participating in decisions around how work is organized or carried out, or by getting involved in the future planning and development of the organization. The full process of involving employees leaves room for individuals to express issues and concerns, feedback and suggestions, and innovation and ideas. Different employees may feel comfortable offering different kinds of input, but a positive and open climate can encourage all forms of participation.

Foster trust: Involvement cannot exist without trust. Employees need to both trust that their organization and leader will treat them with respect, and that their suggestions and input will be heard and, where possible, acted upon. Research has shown that not only does trust develop over time, but that it encourages the development of employee voice in the organization³. This trust is built through regular positive interactions, such as frequent face-to-face meetings between management and staff, where the employee has the full attention and focus of their leader. Observing leaders treating others with respect and regard also helps to further develop the sense that a leader is trustworthy. Outside of involving direct reports, trust in supervisors alone is beneficial to leaders, as it has been shown to relate to higher employee job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and lower turnover intentions⁴.

Recognize your role as a leader: One of the barriers to involving direct reports is a lack of formal opportunities for employees to meet with management, become active in decision-making, and remain informed of updates that pertain to their work or role. However, research has shown that, even in organizations where employees are generally encouraged to remain quiet with their opinions and suggestions, leaders can foster speaking up within their own unit⁴. Major strategic decisions aside, there are dozens of small decisions that determine what direction a unit will go in, which tasks are assigned to which employee, and how the work will be carried out. Providing employees with the opportunity to be involved in how their unit is run can increase their trust in leadership and encourage a positive climate in which to work.

Start Doing These 3 Things Now to Increase Involvement

The following steps can help you increase involvement of direct reports:

1. **Ask for input and suggestions.** There is no one right way to get employees involved. There are many critical moments when input from employees is valuable, such as during times of change or uncertainty, when beginning new projects, or when assigning work. Leaders can also offer regular opportunities for employees to make suggestions about the general work flow of their unit in the absence of any new project or change. As with timing, the format of asking for suggestions can be varied to fit the situation. Leaders can set regular one-on-one meetings with employees to ask for their feedback on an ongoing basis. Team meetings can be called to discuss and brainstorm solutions to problems as a unit. Leaders can make themselves available during specified time slots, providing protected time and a safe space for employees to approach any ongoing issues or concerns. The best approach will depend on the unit, but the important component underlying all strategies is a leader's willingness to make time to ensure their employees are heard.

2. **Keep people informed.** The advantage of keeping employees informed of ongoing events and important updates is two-fold: first, keeping employees up-to-date can give them the necessary information to make useful, helpful suggestions going forward. If the goal is to involve employees in decision making and in the future of the organization, they should be trusted with the knowledge needed to be informed in their input. The second advantage relates directly to this sense of trust: employees who feel respected and trusted by their leaders and organization are more likely to return those feelings, and experience a host of positive outcomes as a result, including higher job performance and satisfaction² and reduced turnover intentions⁵. The process of involving employees is self-perpetuating, in that developing trust encourages voice, which, when respected, fosters further trust and mutual respect.
3. **Take suggestions seriously.** Much of the discussion of involving direct reports includes how to foster a sense of trust and mutual respect between employee and employer. Remember, however, that even well-developed trust can be fragile. The work of involving direct reports does not end with soliciting suggestions. A leader must signal that they are serious about the input of others to maintain this sense of trust, and can do so in several ways. First, implement suggestions where possible. Not only does this show the employee who made the original suggestion that their input is valuable, but it signals to other employees that input is considered and taken seriously. Where possible, pass suggestions on from your employees to upper management. Remember to always give credit where credit is due, acknowledging the contributions of your employees, especially in cases where their suggestions have made a noticeable impact to your unit. Over time, showing this ongoing commitment to respecting and involving employees helps develop an open culture, where employees feel empowered to bring forward not only suggestions and concerns, but new ideas and innovations. Leaders can be the first step in fostering a positive environment that is mutually beneficial and rewarding.

Resources



[The Emerging Work World in the Participation Age](#)



[Why Employees Must be at the Decision-Making Table](#)



Develop your ability to involve direct reports by taking advantage of SIGMA's coaching services.

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References

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