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Interviewee: Edward Cross, Senior Manager, Robert Half

Interviewer: Stuart Cameron

Stuart: Hello, and welcome to the Robert Half Podcast Series. My name is Stuart Cameron. In these days of high competition and business risk, Managers need to inspire their staff to perform at their very best; and in this episode, we talk with Robert Half's Senior Manager, Edward Cross, about how to go about making every day inspirational.

Edward Cross, what are the most effective ways a Manager can inspire their staff?

Edward: Firstly, I think recognition is very important. When your employees accomplish something, I believe that they've achieved something. So therefore your recognition is appreciation of that achievement.

I believe that most Managers don't give enough recognition to their staff, simply because they don't get it enough themselves. So therefore it doesn't come natural to do it. Giving recognition doesn't cost the business anything; you've got to remember that recognition is free.

Secondly, one on one coaching is another effective way. Coaching is employee development; your only cost as a Manager is time. And time means that you care.

Finally, I would say training, training is never finished, and training can ... you can never over train people. For some reason, Managers feel that staff are already trained, or they only need a little bit more training in the future. But I don't think this is true.

My suggestion would be to schedule refresher training sessions with all staff. These sessions should be led by the Manager, with help from specific employees, who show strength in that specific skill set. These types of training sessions will continually enhance the performance of your people.

Stuart: Without mentioning any company names, can you provide us with examples of strong leadership that you've seen as a recruiter?

Edward: The strongest I've seen would be those leaders with excellent vision and strategy. My opinion is that leaders must have a clear idea of where his or her organisation and unit are going beyond this month's results, or this year's budget. Where is the company going in the long term?

So even tactical leaders must be clear about this, and they need to frequently refer to the vision, the missions, the values of the organisation, in their communication with others.

Adaptability is certainly a strong leadership skill. Adaptability and flexibility is not being bound by a plan. It's an important skill in successful leadership today. A leader must not easily, or should I say must easily, be able to move from one set of circumstances to the next, especially if a plan isn't going right. And they must be seen to be able to take it in their stride, even when the circumstances are unexpected.

A final strength that I've seen in a number of leaders is decision making. A leader must be able to wade through information, comprehend what's relevant, and make a well considered decision, and take action based on that decision. Leaders can sometimes make decisions too quickly or too slowly. So this will impede their effectiveness of the leader. So this is a really important skill set to learn.

Stuart: How can companies and their leaders continue to inspire their staff in tough times, such as the recent economic slowdown?

Edward: This is a great point. One of the main challenges in a tough time can be a depressing workplace, where employees feel down. And this can reduce overall productivity, and get in the way of opportunities, teamwork, and creative problem solving.

Some of the suggestions I'll go through are very simple suggestions to keep employees engaged during tough times. Firstly, I think it's very important to communicate goals. Communication cannot be overemphasised, particularly in tough times. Positive communications should indicate where the company's going, and begin to align employee performance goals with the changing objectives of the organisation.

Making employees part of the solution is also critical. Employees need to be involved in decision making, because their buy in is critical for motivation and performance. They should be involved in even the most difficult decisions that a Manager / Leader has to take.

Offering alternatives is another great way to inspire staff. In uncertain times, employees need structure and focus. Reviewing goals frequently is certainly an element to keep people on track. Offering new training programs, career development, cross training, even flexible work schedules are great alternatives.

Measure, when I mention measure, it's making sure employees can measure their own performance against the Key Performance Indicators of the business. This is a key element of employee motivation, because if a worker as an employee cannot measure their progress, it's unlikely their progress will improve.

Finally, rewards. Reward is key to inspiring staff through any tough time. It's especially important that employees feel a sense of accomplishment in their work. So by setting up proper recognition and rewards, they can feel a sense of teamwork and can be acknowledged for their efforts during these tough times.

I think overall, it's easy to forget the importance of employee motivation and recognition, especially in tough times. But we've got to remember it's far more difficult to replace a key member who contributes in hundreds of ways that are unseen each week and each year.

Stuart: Edward, how would you define the attributes of a great leader?

Edward: Firstly, character. A good leader has an exemplary character. It is of upmost importance that a leader is trustworthy to lead others. So a leader needs to be trusted, and to be known to live their life and their work life honestly and with integrity.

True authority is born from respect for the good character and trustworthiness of the person who leads. I would say a good leader also has to be enthusiastic; certainly enthusiastic about their work, and about the role of leader. People, staff, well it will respond more openly to a person of passion and dedication; leaders need to be able to be a source of inspiration, they need to be a motivator towards the required action.

Although the responsibilities of leaders, the roles of leaders, may be different, the leader needs to be seen to be part of the team working towards the goal. So this kind of leader will not be afraid to roll up their sleeves and get dirty, involved in with the work.

A good leader is also confident. You have to be confident as a leader. You need to lead and set direction, and you need to show confidence as a person and in leadership, in the leadership role. Such a leader will inspire confidence in others and draw out the trust and best efforts of the team to complete tasks. A leader who conveys confidence towards proposed objectives of the company inspires the best efforts from team members.

Good leaders are also tolerant of ambiguity, and they can remain calm; they can remain composed and steadfast to the main purpose. Emotions, crises, that come and go in tough times, a good leader can take these as part of the journey and keep a cool head.

Finally, I believe a good leader is committed to excellence for his team, his or her team, and the company.

Stuart: Can strong leadership skills be trained?

Edward: To a certain extent, it has to be taught. There is, however, another issue that, like most other skills, even though it can be taught, not everyone will be able to excel at it, no matter how good the training.

So to be an excellent leader does require some elements of personality and context, such as what we've discussed before; integrity and respect from those you are leading.

So whilst you can teach skills relating to these things, people cannot suddenly change who they are as a person without time and effort that goes far beyond just being taught.

Stuart: What role does inspiring leadership play in staff retention?

Edward: Inspirational leaders do play a key part in staff retention. The trick is to actually keep things simple. And I believe there are five leadership fundamentals that you need to follow.

Firstly, you need to provide employees with a clear sense of where the company are going, and why. Secondly, you need to make sure your staff have the necessary resources to get their job done. As a leader, you need to be attuned to their professional needs, and try to provide them with assignments that meet their needs. You need to regularly meet both formally and informally with your staff to give and get feedback on what's going on.

And finally, get out of their way, let them do their job. But, at the same time, you need to be available when needed.

Stuart: Finally, Edward, how do you know when your staff are truly inspired, and not simply singing from the corporate handbook?

Edward: From my experience, an inspired employee gives his or her all to their employer, and is consistently striving to do their best; to use their skills and talents to their potential. Inspired employees demand more of themselves and others around them; and they're more apt to work well for the Manager in the business.

Stuart: Edward Cross, thanks very much for your time today.

Edward: Thank you.

Stuart: Thank you for listening to the Robert Half Podcast Series. For more information on global employment opportunities and career advice, visit www.roberthalf.net.

End of interview.