

Coaching the Mentor



WHEN RHONDA MARION WAS tapped to oversee the opening of several new restaurants and supervise the operations for Picante, an upscale Mexican restaurant in the San Francisco Bay area, it was a dream come true.

There was just one slight catch. Before taking the new position, which included eventual plans to open at least a dozen restaurants, she had to train a new manager to take her current position in one of the restaurants. Seemed simple enough. But the person she was supposed to mentor ended up being her mirror opposite in just about every way she could imagine.

Marion had years of experience in virtually every aspect of the restaurant business. Her replacement was a relative newcomer. Marion liked to have a plan, make sure everyone knew it, and stick with it. Her replacement was much more free-wheeling. Marion liked to ask those around her a lot of questions, to understand where they were coming from. Her replacement wasn't quite as open, empathic or confident.

Marion found herself in a bit of a bind. If her replacement were more like her, she could coach her more naturally. The transfer of knowledge that had to take place would have been a lot easier, more intuitive, if they were both more alike. And, on one level, Marion probably expected her replacement to be more like her. After all, wasn't Marion being tapped for a promotion because she had done so well in her current position? So wouldn't it make sense for her replacement to be similar to her?

To help ease the transition,

Marion sought coaching from Caliper. In an in-depth session, a consultant was able to point out the natural tendencies, strengths, limitations, similarities and differences between Marion and her replacement. The competencies required to succeed in the management position were then clarified, and specific recommendations were shared for Marion to successfully mentor her replacement.

Marion shares, "My consultant was able to point out connections that were not as obvious before, shed light on issues I had been struggling with and show me how to make the changes needed to succeed. The consultation was very personal and offered specific steps, so that I was able to see improvements in just two weeks."

What advice really hit home?

"Primarily, I learned to accept that she wasn't motivated the same way I was. And there wasn't anything wrong with that. Once I had a clearer understanding of what made her tick, I was able to coach her more effectively. I learned how to create an environment where we could connect and move forward," Marion relates.

"For instance, I know that I respond to structure. I am externally motivated. My replacement, however, has to create her own structure in order to lead people. So I learned to tell her the goal and allow her to create her own path.

And she did very well," Marion says.

"At first, I thought it'd be just me sharing what I know. But it wasn't that easy at all. I learned to accept that she didn't have to follow my pattern. She just had to attain my goal. Prior to that, she would get about half of what I was sharing. And I was very concerned that she just wasn't getting our service structure and style. She was missing the finer points of the experience for our guests. And I didn't

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feel like I knew how to get her to where she needed to be," Marion says.

There was much at stake, so this mentoring needed to succeed. Marion could not move into her new position, overseeing the growth plans for Picante, until the new manager was ready to take on her new position. Time was as important as the results.

What the new manager needed was to make the restaurant's vision her own. So Marion wrote a story about what the perfect experience would be like for one of their

guests. Then she asked the manager how she could make that a reality. Marion says, "I made it clear to her that the goal was unequivocal, but that she could create her own path. Once we were both able to accept that, the mentoring clicked in."

Marion adds, "There were other aspects of the business and her style that I was able to help her with. But we both needed a framework for it to succeed. Once we had that, the rest went smoothly. I was able to help her become more confident, to feel stronger about how she could make things happen, particularly when employees who had been there longer challenged her readiness. Essentially, I helped her understand that she can rely on people if she spends the time to get to know them better. I helped her recognize and feel fine about the notion that some of the people we manage have much more talent than we have. As managers, once we identify, accept and promote the real abilities of others, then they will be more engaged and willing to give it their all."

When did Marion realize that the new manager would succeed?

"I sensed it from the restaurant's personnel and from our guests. There was a perceptible mood change. It didn't happen overnight. But she started conveying that she was helping to create what she was doing. She took on her new position with a different sense of ownership. And it started to work for everybody," says Marion.

Beyond the reward of being able to move into her new position and help the company grow, Marion also learned valuable insights about grooming managers. Ultimately, she relates, "mentoring is as much about objectivity as it is about being intuitive. It's not about me. It doesn't have to be my way. In this case, I learned that it doesn't even have to be about my protégée believing in me. It's really about her believing in herself, and about me helping her get there." ■



Leaders Surrounding Themselves With the Right People

Surrounding yourself with the right people" is among the best and worst aspects of leading a company, according to a survey Caliper conducted of over 300 presidents and chief executive officers.

Surrounding yourself with the right people was selected 42 percent of the time, second only to "creating the right vision," as one of the best parts of being a leader.

Interestingly, it was also selected as one of the most difficult aspects of being an effective leader.

Essentially, these chief executives were telling us that surrounding themselves with the right people is an either/or.

When it doesn't work, it's the worst part of being a leader. It keeps you up at nights, worrying.

It makes you fill in for others. Forces you to make some very tough decisions about letting people go. Or spend a lot of time trying to develop people who aren't really cut out for their jobs. And, worst of all, it keeps you from doing what you're best at.

Surrounding yourself with the right people. When it works, it's the best thing. It frees you up to do what you're best at. To plan for the future. To set a new course. To feel a real sense of confidence in the people who surround you. And to play to your strengths.