

5 Ways to Equip Your People During a Downturn

In his bestselling book, *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell draws attention to the “summer vacation achievement gap” a phenomenon explaining why the academic performance of low-income children tends to lag behind their peers. Studies have shown that students of all income levels make comparable progress during the school year. However, during the summer months, the academic development of kids from affluent households far outpaces that of children from low-income homes.

What makes the difference? Kids from wealthy families are equipped with resources and opportunities to further their education during summer vacation. They participate in summer camps and reading programs, frequent the local library and are surrounded by books at home. On the other hand, students from poorer backgrounds often have no reading material at home and do not have access to educational opportunities in their community. As a result of being ill-equipped during summertime, students from impoverished neighborhoods slip farther and farther behind their classmates each year.

What is true for schoolchildren holds true for employees. Access to the right relationships, resources, and opportunities can make a world of difference in their development. As a leader, it's your duty to enrich and empower your people by fully equipping them to excel on the job.

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Certainly, we'd send our people to the industry's leading conferences and furnish them with the finest technologies if we had the budget to do so. However, in these challenging economic times, equipping our people isn't a responsibility at which we can simply throw money. We have to find more creative ways to equip them as leaders. Here are five to consider:

1) Turn the Tables

To paraphrase John F. Kennedy, “Ask not what your employees can do for you; ask what you can do for your employees.” Serve your people before they serve you. Discover their needs before asking them to take care of yours.

2) Teach by Listening, Not by Telling

Many leaders are quick to impart what they know, and slow to learn about the strengths their people have to offer. Reverse the process by first studying and observing the strong suits of your teammates. Then, lead by listening. As John Holt said, “The biggest enemy to learning is the talking teacher.” Ask questions that prompt people to come up with their own solutions and guide them as they design their own systems for getting the job done.

3) Empower Decision-Makers

If you want to equip your people, then you must empower them. Instead of creating an environment in which two or three decision-makers oversee dozens of decision-doers, invite more voices into the decision-making process. Train leaders at all levels of the organization to weigh the options and initiate the best course of action without waiting for a higher-up to tell them what to do.

4) Adjust Your Pace

At first, training others drags down productivity. To bring another person up to speed, you have to slow down. Wise leaders sacrifice accomplishing tasks in the short-term to properly equip their people for the long-term.

5) Widen the Circle

As a leader, it can be humbling to admit that someone on your team has skills that surpass your own abilities. However, it's natural for students eventually to outperform their teachers in certain areas. When you sense that someone on your team has passed you by, be proactive in searching for outside help to mentor him or her. When you do, your talented teammate will be grateful, and your organization will reap the benefits of his or her growth.



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