Nobody Likes a Know-It-All

How do you balance the need to know with the need to lead?

BY ERIC MATSON
First appeared: FC09, p.126

Good leaders exude limitless confidence. They also understand their limitations. Indeed, the best leaders recognize a fact of life that too many leaders ignore: the people you're working with know more than you do. Even as their teams look to them for guidance, leaders must look to their teams for knowledge.

After seven years as a manufacturing engineer, Boeing's Bruce Moravec had mastered his technical discipline. But when he was promoted to run the 757 Stretch Program, he understood he'd have to gain the confidence of people who worked in areas he knew little about. To stretch the airplane, he had to stretch his skills — and maintain an air of leadership.

"You have to build your credibility in a new role and increase your knowledge at the same time," he says. "If you're a good judge of people, you can find experts in the disciplines you're not familiar with and start relying on them for information."

But how to balance the need to know with the need to lead? "You don't want to pretend you're more knowledgeable about subjects other people know more about," Moravec replies. "That dooms you to failure. I tell all my people we have different roles. My job is to pull things together. They're the experts."

Kerry Shampine, 37, had to make a stretch when he was asked to lead a customer-acquisition team for Northwest Natural Gas, a utility company based in Portland, Oregon. After three years in field operations, Shampine was confident and comfortable in his area of expertise. As a team leader, he'd have to get deeply involved in marketing and engineering as well. But Shampine faced an even more basic problem. His was one of the first teams in company history, and no one, including him or the members of his group, knew how it was supposed to work. His solution: "Let's figure it out together."

"I was in the field when I got the call," Shampine remembers. "I hung up the phone and thought, 'What is this?' All sorts of ideas started racing through my mind, even though I wasn't sure what the team was supposed to do. So I introduced myself to the team, tried to determine if I could really help it and what that help might look like."

Shampine's new team members were just as cautious. They'd been working together four months, without a formal leader, to create new customer-service processes. Shampine's introduction to the team quickly turned into an interview — of him.

"They turned the tables and assembled their own questions for me," he says. "What do you think teamwork is all about? How are we going to fit in the process? How are you going to support us?"

How did the new leader handle the questions? "I admitted that I had no idea what we were going to do," he says. "I was going to have to get familiar with what they did, what they expected of me, and what the company expected of us. Once they realized I had no preconceived notions, they said 'Let's go.'"

That was several years ago. To this day, though, Shampine harbors no illusions about who has the expertise. "If you were to ask me, 'Can you do the work of your team?' I would answer no," he says. "Now, if you were to ask them, 'Can you do what Kerry does for the team?' I hope they would say no too."

"Never Do What You Can Delegate"

"Don't Forget What Got You There"

"Nobody Likes a Know-It-All"

"Lead Individuals, Not the Group"

"Membership Has its Privileges - And Limits"

"If Nominated, You Don't Have to Serve"