

Patching The Pot Holes In Your Leadership Relationships

How To Smooth The Road To Higher Contribution, Engagement, And Profitability

By Kendall C. Wright, President of Entelechy Training and Development, Inc.

Potholes! Have you seen the size of these potholes? They are huge and they're everywhere; boulevards, side streets, access roads, even parking lots. Everywhere I go I encounter these monstrous gaping potholes.

Yesterday, I feared my car was going to be engulfed by a pothole the size of the Bailly lunar crater. As I swerved to avoid the enormous pothole, and oncoming traffic, it occurred to me that many leadership relationships are plagued by "potholes" as well. And those potholes are causing both the leader and the associates to engage in some evasive maneuverers that are highly inefficient, highly ineffective, and frankly, highly irresponsible.

In researching potholes, I learned that a pothole is a type of failure in an asphalt pavement. And the failure is prompted by the presence of water in the substrate of the roadway structure. The water freezes, expands, and weakens the asphalt. With the repeated pressure of traffic on the weakened area, the now poorly supported asphalt surface breaks into pieces. As traffic passes over the weaken spot, the tires excavate both the fragmented asphalt and the loosened soil creating an ever expanding abyss.

You don't have to be a civil engineer to recognize that in many organizations the relationships between leaders and their direct reports are eroding. Perhaps this is true of your relationship with your direct reports. Low levels of engagement, trust, and clarity of purpose are common potholes in today's leadership relationships. If left unattended, the issues will gradually worsen until they completely thwart the team's effectiveness.

Jeff Pegues, reporting for CBS News, cited that experts estimate that potholes in the nation's roadways will cost drivers in excess of \$6.4 billion in auto repairs by the end of 2014. That is simply astounding. If we factor in the cost to municipalities in conducting the actual repairs to the roads, that dollar amount easily escalates exponentially. And while such a number is substantial, it is rivaled by the cost of "potholes" in leadership relationships across the country. According to estimates by the Gallup organization, disengagement in the workplace costs the overall US economy approximately \$350 billion annual. That translates to about \$2,250 per disengaged employee.

As we enter pothole season, here are 5 tips to help you patch the potholes in your relationships with colleagues, associates, and direct reports.

Potholes Are Unavoidable, But Shouldn't Be Ignored. It is unrealistic to think you'll never experience a pothole in your relationships with your direct reports, but it is equally irresponsible to ignore the first signs of a problem. Potholes don't repair themselves, and over time they grow progressively more dangerous. Paranoia isn't the answer, but preparation is.

Assess The Size Of The Pothole. Engaging your direct reports in candid conversation regarding how your leadership approach impacts them and their ability to deliver what is expected of them will give you an accurate assessment of the size of the pothole and what you're up against. It will also give you direction on the type of materials needed.

Use Quality Materials When Patching. It doesn't make sense to repair a damaged surface with inferior materials and expect stellar results. Nor does it make sense to attempt to patch a pothole in a leadership relationship with halfhearted, insincere gestures. Invest in genuine and authentic dialogue and sincere commitments to managing the behaviors that initially created the breach.

Don't Mistake A Temporary Fix For A Long Term Solution. The process of patching a pothole temporarily is much different from a long term repair. The temporary fix is only to restore serviceability; the long term fix is to reinforce the integrity of the structure. A similar approach may prove advantageous in repairing a relationship as well.

Potholes Force Realignment. Potholes, particularly large potholes, can result in a misalignment of key components. After hitting a pot hole make sure all parties are realigned on the mission, method, and measures moving forward. Otherwise you will experience a great deal of uneven wear and reduce tread life.

Leading is demanding, and attempting to lead in an environment littered with potholes is an un navigable proposition. To minimize the damage to all parties, swift and attentive engagement is not only recommended, but required. As you become purposeful in patching the potholes in your relationships, the road to high levels of contribution, engagement, and profitability becomes much smoother and easier to navigate.

Actualizing Leadership Lesson: Highways and byways across the country are marred by a proliferation of potholes. These potholes make it extremely difficult to drive those roads comfortably, to say nothing of expediently. The same is true of the quality of many leadership relationships in the workplace. They, too, have been marred by the potholes of mistrust, poor communication, and low levels of engagement. Leaders must become purposeful and proficient in patching these potholes. In doing so, they ensure themselves a much smoother road to higher levels of contribution, engagement, and profitability.

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Kendall C. Wright, "The Actualizer," CEO of Entelechy T&D, Inc., helps business leaders -at all levels- fulfill the hard parts of their job descriptions. He is the author of *Affirming and Confirming SuccessFUL Living* and most recently released *Conversations On Success*, featuring insights from Les Brown, James Kouzes and other top tier international speakers. Find free resources at www.EntelechyCan.com. Contact us at Kendall@EntelechyCan.com or 513.860.4934.