Table of Contents

How Do I Lead, Practically?

I have been approached a number of times recently by Scrum Masters and Product Owners who had a similar question: "How do I get (my team, these people, etc.) to do this thing I think is a good idea?" For good reason they are not interested in being dictatorial. But they also want to see a particular behavior adopted because they think it is a good practice. "What have you done so far?", I ask. The normal approach is to set up meetings to discuss the idea or to try one-on-one conversations but the result is that the group does not take on the idea.

A better approach is to do the behavior you want so that others see it, and set things up so others can do the behavior as well. Perhaps my favorite way to understand this is through the (3 min) Dancing Man video. There are a lot of lessons from this video but the main idea is the importance of recognizing the first person (first follower) who accepts your idea so that your idea is not seen as one person with an idea (the lone nut). Through the first follower you are transformed from a "loan nut" into "a leader with an idea that others might want to take notice of."

Before it even gets to the point of the first follower you have the leader who is doing what he wants others to do. He is taking a risk of being perceived as a lone nut. By taking that risk others will understand that he thinks the practice has value which creates an environment where others can consider idea. The investment he makes changes the dynamics of the discussion so the that it is not just an idea leaders think "others should be doing, but is not for us." (In the dancing man video, imagine the reaction if the leader had said to someone in the crowd "go out there and dance.")

This is "leadership by example". In an organization of knowledge workers where everyone is smart, this can be an effective way of motivating people. More importantly it can be done without the obviously coercive tactics that you might otherwise deploy and so can be effective in situations where you either have no direct power over the people you want to influence or do not wish to use that power directly.

So in summary, if you want some particular behavior from a group of people, start by doing it yourself. When you find someone else doing what you want, make sure you embrace that person as an equal and enthusiastically support their efforts. Movements get started this way - see the Dancing Man video.

BlogEntry, FAQ, Leadership