



Stanford eCorner

The Push-Pull of Leadership

Liz Wiseman, *Author*

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Leadership educator and author Liz Wiseman shares a story that illustrates how great leaders help their employees overcome struggles, while also remembering to step away and hand back responsibility to give them a chance to grow and gain confidence.



Transcript

How do you walk the fine line between making people suffer and keeping them motivated? Let me share something I learned from a Stanford grad. He got both his undergrad and his masters here at Stanford, I was very fortunate to hire him into Oracle. He went on to work for McKinsey, and he ran, this is Jay Choi, he ran the Seoul office for McKinsey. And I was interviewing him for my research on multipliers and he said something interesting to me, he said, Liz, when your people are struggling, it's irresponsible not to help. He said, but you have to remember to hand the pen back. And I wasn't sure what he was talking about. And he explained a moment in time, it's 2:00 a.m. in the Seoul office. All the lights are out except this one conference room because Jay and a project team have a huge deliverable for the next day. They are putting - they have been doing a business transformation.

So they are putting together the pitch for this client on how they're going to take the project to the next level, it is their most important Pan-Asian client. It's 2:00 a.m. and the team is dead in the water, stuck. They are trying to come up with a story and they have got nothing. And at one point, the project leader turns to Jay like, "hey, we could use a little help." Jay is a very experienced consultant. He's been in their shoes a long time. He is there as the executive sponsor. And so he takes the pen from the project leader and he goes up to the board and he starts to map it out because he can see the issues, the themes are clear to him. And he starts to lay it out, and you can only imagine how good this feels. It's almost like this intoxicating feeling of rescuing, saving the day, and he's laying out the storyboard, and about two-thirds of the way through his idea he stops.

And the multiplier in him signals restraint. And he just pauses there, he turns back to the project leader, hands the pen back. And he said, "here are a few ideas to get you started, why don't you take it from there?" He said, when your people are struggling, it is responsible not to help, but you've got to remember to hand the pen back. What's the pen? Responsibility, control, accountability. Help people get out of the ditch, but put them back in the lead is I think the way you keep people from suffering too much. And make sure they are in charge and they are driving and motivated.