

Where Is Your Attention Going?

by Margaret J. Marcuson

Have you ever said about your followers, "If they would only--"? If we pay more attention to our own goals than to what others are doing, ultimately we will find ourselves having more influence.

As leaders, we do need to keep our eye on our followers, because we're not leading if no one is following. But if we're thinking more about them than about our own purpose, we won't know where we're going. It is exhausting to think about others all the time. And we can find ourselves spending a lot of energy trying to convince others to agree with us. Or we tiptoe around those who are difficult and make a lot of noise, which can also wear us out. Or we ask people where they want to go so we can lead them there.

Before you focus on others, you need to focus on yourself. What are your goals for yourself as a leader, long term and short-term? For example: you can plan how to spend your time this year. For example: I'd like to learn more about supervision, or dramatic presentation methods. Or, I plan to get out of the office more and connect with people in the community. Goals can also be short-term and immediate: in this particular meeting I plan to say less--or more.

We use our energy better when we focus on ourselves and our own functioning, rather than constantly trying to scope out others. For one thing, we can control ourselves, not others. I can't control the outcome of any given meeting, no matter how critical. I can only manage how I function, what I chose to say and do in that meeting. Paradoxically, how I act, particularly if I can stay calm and clear without getting anxious or defensive, can make a difference to the outcome. Controlling how I act changes how others respond to me, which is different from, and far more effective than, trying to control how everything turns out.

Clarity about our own purpose takes time and energy. Discerning our direction deserves our attention. But if we have clear goals for ourselves, both short-term and longer-term, our anxiety will automatically be lower. A clear, calm leader lowers everyone else's anxiety, too, and helps give people the confidence to follow.