

*Chapter 6***EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP ENVIRONMENTS**

*“The environment influences how we feel, think, and behave and can either facilitate or impede desired courses of action.”*

— Michael K. Ponton and Paul B. Carr (2012)

Several factors can make or break a leader’s effectiveness. One factor that plays a significant role in a leader’s success is the environment in which he or she operates—the people the leader interacts with, the news and social media, the advisors, the spouses, the location, and so on. All interactions with the environment help a leader to become successful when the environment is favorable. Alternatively, an environment can be hostile and prevent success. A leader could have all the characteristics necessary for being an effective leader, but the environment could still prevent him from using them properly. In fact, some leaders may be very ineffective in certain environments. Ultimately, the environment shapes the leader’s behavior and personality (Bandura, 1986). When the environment is good, there is a strong likelihood that a leader will have a good personality and good behavior. However, if the environment is bad, the leader’s personality and behavior are affected because a number of things might be brought into question. Therefore, in this chapter, I will discuss the four relevant environments conducive to effective leadership: 1) nurturing environment, 2) trusting environment, 3) supportive environment, and 4) inspiring environment. Examples and situations that show the importance of the environment in which leadership takes place will be highlighted because the environment is vital for effective leadership.

## 1. NURTURING ENVIRONMENT

The home is always a good starting point when you think of a leader's environment. The father is supposed to be the leader of the house. When the home is a nurturing and favorable place, the father is able to lead his family with minimal difficulties. For example, he may lead the family to engage in different activities, such as going to a movie, visiting friends, watching some football, inviting friends over for a cookout, etc. Family members are happy to have such a father who can guide them through all activities. The nurturing home environment makes the father become a successful leader for his family. When he goes to work, he cannot wait to go back home to interact with his family. A nurturing environment is essential for a successful family leader. When mistakes are made, a wife is able to encourage and help her husband get back on track. The nurturing environment is appreciated by all household leaders. In fact, when things are not right, the head of the family is not afraid to face reality because he knows the nurturing environment will help him get back on track. A leader should have such a nurturing environment at all times. Not only is the nurturing environment needed at home, but it is needed in all areas of a leader's life for him or her to lead successfully.

Sometimes, leaders do not have full control over their environments. Consider when the environment is not nurturing and favorable for a leader in the home. Then problems compound upon problems. In some cases, the father may resort to working longer hours because he does not want to be home. He knows when he is home that troubles always arise. With a lack of encouragement, he may resort to staying out late because he wants only minimal interaction with his wife. In short, unnurturing environments can drain a leader's willpower. In fact, a leader in such an environment leads a miserable life. He may not physically show how miserable he is, but certainly, his environment has become toxic.

A nurturing environment has very specific benefits for those in leadership roles. It helps to teach, promote, and reinforce social behavior because the leader is in a position where he can talk and discuss issues with his followers. In addition, the nurturing environment limits influences and opportunities for problem behavior. The barriers can be broken down because a leader works closely with the followers. Obviously, working together fosters collaboration, which results in positive experiences for both a leader and his followers. Further, a nurturing environment enables leaders to gain new learning experiences from those who surround him. This is achieved

when a leader is willing to listen to what his followers have to say. When a leader and his followers share a nurturing environment, it is a win—win situation.

## **2. TRUSTING ENVIRONMENT**

Every leader needs a trusting environment. If the work environment is devoid of trust, effective leadership is in big trouble because no one wants to work in such an environment. Both a leader and her followers will always be doubting what the other is doing. In some cases, a leader may not make a good decision because she is constantly worried about the followers she cannot trust or who believe they cannot trust her. In this situation, a volatile and chaotic work environment results. When a leader is in a trusting environment, she directs activities in a positive direction, knowing that things will get accomplished. Also, her followers appreciate that they are being led by a reliable, responsible, and accountable leader. Both sides enjoy the relationship when the environment is trusting.

An example that illustrates the value of a trusting environment for effective leadership is the Trump administration in the United States. When President Donald Trump took office in 2017, lack of trust caused many issues to arise over his choices for his cabinet. Everyone, including the president, was on edge because the political environment was not conducive to effective leadership. Due to this lack of trust, the National Security Advisor to the Trump administration, Michael Thomas Flynn, was fired after only twenty-four days on the job. President Trump indicated that he fired Flynn because Flynn lost his trust. Lack of trust adds stress for everyone involved.

This situation clearly shows that a trusting environment is critical for a leader. When the environment is trusting for a leader, it leads to positive bonding with the leader's followers. When a leader and her followers bond, it's an indication that they are accepting of one another's viewpoints. A leader can then guide her followers clearly because the two sides are not worried about each other. Think about your organization. Do you trust your leaders? If you trust them, then things are working perfectly. But what happens if there is no trust? Think about a partner you do not trust now or have not trusted in the past. The situation becomes tense very quickly. The same is true when a leader is in an environment that is not trusting. The example of U.S. President Donald Trump is a clear indication that a trusting environment is vital for any leader, regardless of where the person is in his or her leadership journey.

### 3. SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

Without question, leading others requires a supportive environment. If a leader does not have a supportive environment, he may have difficulties leading. The Christian viewpoint teaches everyone to respect those in authority. This view is based in Scripture. For instance, through Romans 13:1-5, God commands us as follows:

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of the wrath but also for conscience's sake (NKJV).

Based on these biblical teachings, it is clear that a leader needs a supportive environment; it is even a command from our Lord. We all subject ourselves to our leaders because they are appointed by God. They serve a purpose in his plan. God appoints the leaders, and since they get their authority from God, we are bound to obey and support them. Only when our leaders order us to do something that contradicts God's law are we allowed to question their authority. A supportive environment will make life easier for a leader, and he or she will lead followers with confidence while maintaining leadership integrity.

Without doubt, a supportive environment is essential for any leader. When we think biblically, the elements of supporting a leader are clearly indicated. The book of Ephesians 5:22-33 clearly tells wives to understand and support their husbands in the same ways they would show support for Christ. Conversely, the husband should provide leadership to his wife the way Christ does to his church, not with domination but by cherishing. The supportive environment is vital in any relationship. Therefore, a leader needs an environment that is supportive of him or her to be effective.

During the 2016 presidential campaign in the United States, President Trump did not have a supportive environment. The Republican Party did not fully embrace him as their leader. Yes,

there were problems and controversies surrounding his candidacy. As if that were not enough, President Trump did not have a fully supportive environment when he took office. He faced opposition from all walks of life. When he signed an executive order on immigration, banning people from seven Muslim countries: Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen, there was great opposition, even from within his cabinet. The court blocked his executive order in its early days. This did not end well for the Trump administration. According to the White House, the acting Attorney General, Sally Yates, was fired for refusing to enforce the order designed to protect the citizens of the United States (“Pres. Trump fires acting AG Sally Yates,” 2017). This shows how important a supportive environment is for a leader. If the leader has a lack of support, it is difficult for both the leader and his or her followers to help one another. The leader then faces challenges on the proper way forward.

At the state level in the United States, Wisconsin governor, Scott Walker, faced a lot of opposition in 2011 after he officially cut collective bargaining rights for the vast majority of the state’s public employees. I recall the actions very well because at that time I was in Madison, Wisconsin, the state’s capital, on official duties. I did not work for the government, but the demonstrations and all the actions affected everyone in Madison. The hotels were filled with protesters. Everywhere I went, the protesters were in sight. It was a defining year for the state of Wisconsin because collective bargaining rights had been customary in Wisconsin up to that point.

While these demonstrations were going on, Governor Walker had a supportive environment provided by his party. The Republican Party of Wisconsin stood its ground alongside Scott Walker, who succeeded with his plans. During a recall election, he emerged a winner, beating his opponent Tom Barrett. Scott Walker became the first governor in United States history to survive a recall election. Not only did the Republican Party provide Walker with a supportive environment, but Walker’s wife, Tonette, provided full support for her husband. There is no doubt that Scott Walker succeeded because of his supportive environment—the people, the party, and his wife. When a leader has a supportive environment, he can lead his followers to their desired goal.

A supportive work environment has a number of advantages. One of them is that it provides a work-life balance. Everyone needs to be available for family and have some personal time. A supportive work environment for a leader will ensure that the leader has time off to focus on

personal matters. The followers will understand what a leader is going through, and they will give him or her all the necessary support needed to ensure that the work-life balance is maintained. Lack of a supportive work environment cannot help in that regard because both a leader and his or her followers will have doubts as to what is happening when one of them is not present. Therefore, a supportive environment is vital for effective leadership.

#### **4. INSPIRING ENVIRONMENT**

Does a leader need an inspiring environment? While this question may sound awkward, the answer is yes. An inspiring environment simply means an environment that encourages, exalts, or motivates. Therefore, the environment in which leadership occurs should be uplifting for the leader. If the environment is not inspiring, the leader may be demotivated. An inspiring environment is conducive to good leadership because leaders are encouraged to do more than they originally thought possible. When leaders are in such environments, they are happy because they look forward to what the future will bring.

The inspiring environment is motivating for a leader. Therefore, leaders know that they can accomplish tasks with the people and resources at hand. If the environment is not inspiring, leaders fall into the agony of the leadership paradox we discussed in the last chapter. Sometimes they do not want to continue leading because nothing motivates them to continue. Conversely, when the environment is inspiring, they know their followers are looking up to them for guidance.

Inspiring environments do not occur in a vacuum. They occur where leadership takes place. Leaders look up to others as they progress on the leadership journey because they want to do more and be successful. For example, President Barack Obama was successful in the United States; he was inspired and moved by the late Nelson Mandela, former president of South Africa. During a meeting with South African President Jacob Zuma, Mr. Obama was asked about his policy toward Africa. His response showed he was deeply inspired and moved by the work and characteristics of Nelson Mandela. ABC News Chief White House Correspondent Jonathan Karl states that Obama responded to the question as follows:

Mandela shows what was possible when a priority is placed on human dignity, respect for law, that all people are treated equally...what Nelson Mandela also stood for is that the well-being of the country is more important than the interests of any one person....

George Washington is admired because after two terms he said enough, I'm going back to being a citizen. There were no term limits, but he said I'm a citizen. I served my time. And it's time for the next person, because that's what democracy is about. And Mandela similarly was able to recognize that, despite how revered he was, that part of this transition process was greater than one person (Karl, 2013).

This response clearly indicates that an inspiring environment does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, it occurs where inspiring people live despite being in a difficult environment. This is what a leader needs. If there is no inspiration, nobody remembers what leaders did. They may be part of history, but nothing else. This is the same when we look at places of employment and at home. For example, parents may be inspired to raise their children to be like a neighbor who appears to have good manners. Sometimes parents will choose friends for their children depending on the families who are inspirational within the community.

Think about it—would you like your son or daughter to make friends with a drug dealer or someone who is a thief? Most rational parents will intervene if their children are openly involved in relationships with people who have bad reputations because those people do not provide an inspiring environment for children. It is the same with leadership. A leader needs an inspiring environment in order to function effectively. Think about leadership in a marriage. If a spouse only has friends who are single, divorced, or separated, what sort of environment does the other partner think that brings into the household? Definitely not an inspirational one. Does that create a problem? I will leave that up to you. However, an inspiring environment is needed for all leaders to function effectively. How would you contribute to making sure your leader has such an environment?

### **ACHIEVING AN EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP ENVIRONMENT**

Many ways exist to ensure the right environment for effective leadership is present. These ways lead to a positive working relationship between a leader and his or her followers. They have been used by many people in various organizations, homes, churches, and in social settings. I would encourage you to pay special attention to each of the ways discussed in the remainder of this chapter. As you read through these suggestions, think of examples that apply to your particular situation. You will notice that they all relate to one another in helping build a sustainable environment conducive to leadership effectiveness. In this chapter, I will only offer five of the

ways that I believe are essential for achieving an effective leadership environment. Those ways are: 1) having open and clear communication, 2) providing feedback, 3) being flexible, 4) listening to everyone's ideas, and 5) changing how you respond.

## **1. HAVING OPEN AND CLEAR COMMUNICATION**

One way to ensure the environment is favorable for effective leadership is by having open and clear communication. Both sides involved in a leader-follower relationship should consider the flow of communication and whether it is affecting the leadership environment. Open communication, among other things, will help build trust between a leader and his or her followers. When leaders trust their followers and vice versa, the relationship is positive and everyone can contribute to decisions without fear of retaliation. When things are going well, everyone knows that things are well. On the other hand, when things do not go well, everyone knows the reasons because all parties involved are part of the process.

Open communication is vital for making sure there is a good environment for leadership. Therefore, if your communication is not good, work toward improving it right away. Results of open communication are exciting for both leaders and followers. The key to good communication is that it must be clear and direct. If there are issues, do not avoid them by pretending they do not exist. Issues must be addressed head-on, with a clear definition of why something is an issue. Otherwise, lack of clear and open communication will lead to grapevine communication, which is bad for all those involved.

When I first moved to the United States, I worked for a small local organization in Wisconsin. One challenge I faced there happened when communication failed because instructions were not clear to me. I recall being asked to get a torch from the back of a pickup truck. Coming from Malawi, I knew what a torch was, but it had a different meaning to my American colleagues. I went into the truck and brought a flashlight. Whew! That didn't go well. My leader thought something was wrong with me. At the same time, I thought my leader was confused because he did not know what he was asking for. In fact, we were both right in our own ways. A torch in Malawi and all other English-speaking countries outside of North America means a flashlight. In the United States and Canada, the term torch denotes a device that produces a hot flame and is used for tasks such as cutting or joining pieces of metal. The disconnection came into play because the same word is used for different things depending on where one is located. Therefore,

open and clear communication should always be emphasized to make sure everyone is understanding what is being discussed.

Open communication is not only verbal; sign and body language are part of it, too. Think about the ambiguous messages sent when a person speaks of one thing but his or her body language is saying the opposite. For example, when a spouse or significant other says, “I’m fine” but stands with crossed arms and looks away, is he or she really “fine”? Does stating the opposite of what is true make for a good communication strategy? Being clear and open at all times helps make the work environment conducive to achieving an effective leadership environment.

## **2. PROVIDING FEEDBACK**

Sometimes providing feedback is a tough task to ask of someone. However, it is as critical as any task that can be imagined. For communication to be effective, four sides must be involved: a sender, a message, a receiver of information, and feedback. When a sender sends a message, the receiver receives it and provides feedback. The absence of feedback means that the process is not complete because the sender is left speculating whether the message has been received and understood. Think about a husband and wife who are in the same house but never communicate well because one asks for something or says something and the other does not acknowledge having received the information or knowing what is going on.

The inability to provide feedback creates dysfunction and needs to be addressed and resolved. Feedback is essential for making sure everyone is on the same page. Whether the feedback is favorable is another story, but at least provide something to your leader or follower. Obviously, there are good, bad, and ugly ways of providing feedback. But in this book, only the better ways of providing feedback are encouraged. What is your style?

## **3. BEING FLEXIBLE**

Another way to ensure an environment for effective leadership is present is by being flexible. Many of us only look out for ourselves but forget that we are not the only people in the leader-follower relationship. When people think only of themselves, they are living in isolation.

Therefore, they will not be team players.

Remember that leadership does not happen in a vacuum. Two sides are involved: leaders and followers. If one side is not flexible, that side is only thinking of itself. By doing so, selfish

behaviors start to emerge. These behaviors will lead to mistrust and, ultimately, create a chaotic environment. Being flexible means that both sides will think of the other.

For instance, not many people are interested in meeting late Friday afternoon. If a leader is not flexible, he or she may schedule a meeting at that time without thinking of followers' needs. Remember that at this time most people are mentally checked out. They are thinking about getting home to their families and having a good weekend. When a meeting is called, everyone will be complaining that the leader is only thinking of him- or herself. Truly, that meeting is not as productive as the same meeting at a different time.

#### **4. LISTENING TO EVERYONE'S IDEAS**

Listening is vital in every relationship. A leader who does not listen to followers is not an effective leader. Conversely, a follower who does not listen to a leader is just asking for trouble. Remember that everyone is in the leader-follower relationship for a reason. Therefore, both sides must be encouraged to speak up and be heard. No question is superior over another. It is your responsibility as a leader or follower to lend a listening ear to what is being said. Sometimes, all it takes is setting up specific times during the day and having an open dialogue with those involved.

Remember not to interrupt while someone else is talking. I know this from personal experience since I am raising four daughters. At times, it can be an overwhelming experience not to interrupt, but when you do so, the doors of communications close. The one being interrupted feels bad, isolated, and unimportant. At our dinner table, this happens a lot. I can see my daughters' faces of frustration when they are trying to say something, but keep getting interrupted. It is not pleasant. Therefore, to help make an effective environment for leadership, it is best to listen to everyone's ideas.

This situation also applies to work where instead of listening and being fully engaged in a meeting, a boss or someone becomes busy on his or her laptop or phone. Everyone knows that those involved in such behaviors are not listening or paying attention to the discussion. It sets up a bad environment and leads to failure. Therefore, to help achieve an effective leadership environment, I encourage everyone involved in a meeting to pay special attention by listening to everyone else's ideas. Otherwise, it is useless to have a meeting. When you listen, you can help, and then everyone will count on and appreciate you.

## 5. CHANGING HOW YOU RESPOND

The *way* we respond to others sends a signal. For example, if someone has an idea and we respond by mocking it, that person will not be happy. Our responses should be positive because negative responses build barriers to communication. When disagreeing, consider using positive feedback, such as “That is an interesting perspective. I never thought of it that way.” Once the positive atmosphere is present, the environment will be effective for leadership.

Consider how you would feel in this situation: You are trying to communicate an idea with your leader. He or she responds by saying, “That is the dumbest things I have ever heard.” Or “You are not the sharpest pencil in the drawer.” How would that make you feel?

In the same conversation, what if the response were, “That is an interesting viewpoint.” or “That sounds like a good idea. Let us talk more about this.” Would that change your work environment? Most likely, different responses will impact the listener differently. Therefore, I encourage you always to focus on the positives by changing the way you respond to questions and discussions. Doing so will foster a positive work environment for effective leadership to be achieved.

## SUMMARY

Positive environments are vital for any leader to be successful. Effective leadership environments influence the leader’s behavior and personality. Lack of environments conducive to good leadership will lead to frustration, anger, and resentment. While many different environments foster effective leadership, this chapter focused on the four environments of nurturing, trusting, supporting, and inspiring—the environments deemed vital for a leader to be effective. Leaders will flourish if these environments are present for them because they will not be afraid to speak up. At the same time, followers will be encouraged to discuss things that matter the most in helping create an effective leadership environment. Remember that a good working environment leads to more success.

Many strategies exist that can help you and others make the environment better for effective leadership. Some of the ways discussed in this chapter include having open and clear communication, providing feedback, being flexible, listening to everyone’s ideas, and changing the way you respond during conversations. While these ways are not exhaustive, they offer a

starting point for you to help your leader be part of a favorable environment so he or she can become effective. The key question is: How will you contribute to making sure you are providing these environments for your leaders?

**PERSONAL APPLICATION**

Think about the following questions and attempt to answer them to the best of your ability:

1. How can you help a leader function effectively if the environment is not nurturing?

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2. Trust is an essential condition for an effective leadership environment. How can you help a leader to sustain trust?

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3. What should a leader do to ensure he or she has a supportive environment?

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4. What does an inspiring environment look like for you?

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5. What are some ways to achieve an effective leadership environment?

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