So you want to help your team succeed

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It's been about a month since I've been a first-time manager. Before I started, I asked my CEO what advice he had for me. Here's what he said:

1. Partner, don't command
2. Don't throw weight around because of the title. It's alright if it happens unknowingly, but it's crossing a line when done intentionally
3. Take up more work, because that's how you build trust

I understood these, because it was simple and straightforward. Coming from an IC background, this was sort of natural to me anyway because I didn't know how to lead. But then, there came a point very recently when I realized the entire marketing team was tiny, 4 folks including me.

The problem with a tiny team

That's a natural setup both in the age of AI as well as in a company at the Series A stage, but I was in a tug-of-war between 2 very difficult problem statements:

1. Marketing traditionally was not seen as a growth lever. We had an ambitious charter of both category creation as well as driving pipeline. Driving pipeline is a straightforward mandate, but not when you have to revisit your basics of ICP and lead qualification. Over and above that, we were also trying to cope with AI and automations, trying to do our job once and then automate it using skills probably the next time.
2. The second issue was about unlocking capacity of each team member. That meant better ownership, accountability, craftsmanship, and also becoming a strategic thinker. Being strategic at the outset for us meant one thing: what is our unique insight about both our swim lanes, as well as the market?

When deadlines started becoming tighter and constraints more unforgiving, I was in a spot where I had to reach out to my manager, the CMO, to also wear an IC hat and step in. We needed all hands on deck because we were creating a whole new market category.

To my surprise, my manager said one thing: "Give me more work to do. Assign tasks like you would generally to your reports."

This was unusual for me, since I always assumed you would only go to your higher-ups with solutions to problems, not work itself. Asks are different because they're project and stakeholder dependencies. Here I was, coming up with a laundry list of items to work on.

What servant leadership means

That's when my manager introduced me to "servant leadership" as a concept. I loved it, and I'm in the process of internalizing it myself, but here's what I've understood about it:

A true leader's goal is to serve those they lead. It's kind of like taking the inverse of a problem you have and reverse engineering it. Because if you think about it, a leader's real mandate is to drive influence, not direct and execute.

And this makes logical sense to me, because if you think about it:

1. Maslow's law dominates it all. If needs are met, belonging and growth in the context of career, meaningful contributions happen.
2. As an ex-IC, and I hard relate, system and work constraints bubble up from the bottom.
3. Motivation and incentives are tightly coupled. That's when folks really go above and beyond, and I believe you need that in any setup.

Putting it into practice

And I'm unsure if I'm right in doing this, and time will tell, but here's how I'm putting thought to action:

1. Whenever a task needs to be done or assigned, I always lead with one question: "what do you think about this approach?" It might sound simple, but my notion with that is to make everything we do a partnership. Decisions need to be democratic. Information needs to flow transparently, and bi-directionally, regardless of good or bad.
2. Building people first. I'm approaching this by guiding teammates to become more strategic. Take your task, automate it or make it into a dashboard, and then you're responsible for sharing insights, correlations, and causations. All tied to core business metrics, not just what you handle.
3. Removing barriers. This is a tricky one. Barriers are often cultural, that manifest as technical. I openly conveyed that marketing was not conventionally seen as a growth lever, and it must. So any task we pick up needs to be closest and directly in service of revenue. And so when random work comes through from other teams, we clarify the need of it based on revenue impact. If focused effort becomes culture, then process becomes ammunition and a force multiplier, not a defensive shield.
4. Lastly, one thing another mentor of mine said is that being a leader is a very thankless job. You're paid more to shield your team from shit, to bring clarity to the table, and genuinely invest in the growth of others. That means pointing the limelight to them. No one will ever thank you when BAU happens as intended, even though there's a lot that goes into it.