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It has been said that a good leader should have an open door policy and be accessible to his or her employees and other important relationships. However, accessibility is about both physical accessibility and interpersonal accessibility.

For instance, Fred is a manager who keeps the door to his office open almost all of the time. When he received some feedback about not being accessible to his employees, he became defensive. “Of course, I’m accessible,” he responded, “unless I’m in a private meeting, my door is always open. Ask anyone and they will tell you that I do have an open door policy, just like the organization says we should.”

This manager, unfortunately, has a limited perception about what an open door policy is really about. Beyond the literal physical open door, there must be an emotional accessibility that will make people feel welcomed and as if their needs and concerns will be listened to. One who tends to dismiss or make light of employee concerns is not behaving in a way that reflects the intent of an open door policy.

“Open door”, then, is an attitude or a way of being that reflects a leader’s openness. The meaning and intention is usually assumed but rarely defined. Here, then, are some ways that a leader can behave in a way that sends that message of genuine accessibility to employees and other important relationships:

- The “open door” leader makes him or herself visible and accessible to the extent possible. This can be accomplished by having an open office door, and by “making rounds” and checking in with employees as they are working on the job.
- The “open door” leader looks up from the desk and smiles when people are walking by, exhibiting a warm and welcoming style.
- The “open door leader” is responsive, promptly returning email and voicemail messages, especially to employees.
- The “open door” leader uses keen powers of observation or intuition to assess the seriousness of a visitor’s issue, and closes the door immediately to provide privacy in sensitive situations.
- The “open door” leader does not make a person feel rushed. He or she is openly communicative about availability for drop-ins: “Barb, I have 5 minutes for you now, or I can give you more time later this afternoon. Which would you prefer?”
- The “open door” leader never gives non-verbal messages that the person is intruding into their space or is an annoyance to them.
- The “open door” leader is a good listener, showing respect for all issues brought to them. In addition, people know that they can be trusted with confidential information.
- The “open door” leader listens with an open mind and an open heart, taking care to not be judgmental, and offering resources, advice or just a listening ear when needed.

Organizations that want to encourage an open door policy among their leadership team must take the time to discuss and define what that really means to them. Since organizational cultures will vary, it is important to come to an understanding about what “open door” looks like, sounds like and feels like to others. This is especially important if the concept of “open door” will be considered in the leader’s performance appraisal.

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