Are you a manager or a leader?

By Robert Half International

In your interactions with team members, do you act mainly as a manager or as a leader? The question may seem like splitting hairs, but it's not. Although the terms are often used synonymously, they represent two very different approaches to the supervision of personnel and projects.

A manager is typically someone in charge of a set of tasks or a group of people, while a leader's job is to guide or influence people to achieve a shared goal. Managers maintain the status quo; leaders inspire employees toward higher levels of accomplishment. Management includes duties such as organizing and coordinating, whereas leadership goes beyond these functions to communicate a vision. Management is concerned with the day-to-day; leadership is about the big picture and the future.

Where would you say you fall in this divide? Are you primarily a manager focused on coordinating your team's activities? Or are you a leader, guiding team members not only to fulfill their responsibilities and accomplish the company's objectives but also to achieve professional growth?

Although it's important to have key managerial skills, it's more critical for your long-term career prospects to maximize your leadership potential. Wherever you fall on the spectrum, here are some tips to help you develop your ability to guide, inspire and positively influence your workers.

Share your vision It's no surprise that when people think their jobs are important, they tend to be more productive and engaged. An oft-quoted example is Southwest Airlines, where employees are encouraged to think of the company as a customer-service business that happens to fly airplanes. This simple vision helps employees see their work as meaningful.

As a leader, share your vision with your staff members by creating messages that will help employees understand your company's mission and the part they play in it.

Get out of the way We think of a leader as the person out in front of everyone else -- the head of the group. But in the workplace, some of the most effective leaders are those who stay "off-camera," like the

director of a movie. These individuals provide ongoing guidance and feedback but allow employees to find their own best ways to perform their work. As a leader, avoid getting caught up in the "how" of what your team is doing. Instead, keep yourself and everyone else focused on the "why."

Give others room to shine Great leaders inspire others by giving them a chance to showcase their talents and knowledge. When difficulties occur with project management or workflow processes, for example, ask your team for solutions and alternatives. Your employees are your greatest resource -- don't hesitate to tap them for ideas. You'll build their confidence, increase their engagement and demonstrate that you value their professional expertise.

Learn from your mistakes As a leader, don't expect to be perfect, and don't be afraid to admit when you're wrong. Find the lesson in every mistake you make. Your open-mindedness and willingness to adjust your approach will set a positive example for your employees to follow.

One of the best ways to develop your abilities as a leader is to observe colleagues who you think inspire their teams. Pay attention to how they interact with employees and how they conduct themselves in a variety of business situations.