

Seven Simple Tips from a Proven Leader

By Jennifer Selby Long

“I’m stumped. I brought Chuck into Cisco as top talent, a process improvement expert with a great track record at other companies. I know he’s high potential, but he’s really struggling, and he’s frustrated, and he’s not getting the results that he’s capable of. I’m afraid we’re going to lose him to a competitor. I’ve never had this problem before and I don’t know what else to do. Can you help?”

That was my introduction to Chuck Trent. As you can see by the fact that names have not been changed to protect the innocent, Chuck is no wimp who hides out. He started working to help support his family at the age of 12, he flew helicopter missions in Vietnam (medical and combat), he taught Los Angeles SWAT teams, and perhaps the scariest challenge of all – he’s supported seven kids! Now that they’re grown with kids of their own, I simply refer to Chuck’s family as The Cast of Thousands.

When I met Chuck, he was a man who had never experienced a big failure at work. Setbacks, sure. When he got back from Vietnam, the economy was terrible and no one wanted to hire vets so he swept buses for a living, and he’s had the usual setbacks we all suffer.

But those were situations largely beyond his control. This was different. Chuck had been brought into the fast-growing barely-controlled chaos of Cisco in 1999 for his talent in standardizing and optimizing complex processes.

I was there, working with many different groups in the company, and I can attest that they needed Chuck’s talent in the worst way. But it seemed that everything he tried to do stalled out. The star was producing average results and besides the pain to the business, it was deeply painful for him personally.

He was so exasperated that he told his boss he was beginning to question if he’d made the right decision to come there, because he just didn’t feel he could be successful there, and he didn’t know why. It felt like there was a “secret sauce” he needed to take advantage of the many opportunities there, and he was having a really difficult time understanding the culture.

Luckily, Al wasn’t about to let such a plum hire go off to the competitors, and he asked Chuck if he would like to work with a coach who could bring in an outside perspective and help him break through the blockades.

Before I share what Chuck did to break through the barriers and achieve his potential, I’m going to share what *I saw Chuck do* that so many people never do: he put his ego on ice. Open yourself to the tough feedback you need to hear to reach your personal best. The funny thing about putting your ego on ice and dropping your defenses is that, ironically, you get stronger by allowing yourself to feel the vulnerability.

In fact, what I learned interviewing Chuck's team, peers, and internal clients was that Chuck brought specific strengths to the table, and lots of them. The challenge was not at all in what he did, but in how he was doing it.

And now, Chuck Trent's seven tips to be an effective leader:

1. Connect with the right people. This requires you to find out who the right people are. It's not always who you think it is. Think about everyone who might be significantly impacted by your project, initiative, or plan.
2. Adapt to people of different personality types. Chuck had taken the MBTI® several times before, but we dug much deeper. Not only was Chuck able to bring more of his true self to the role, he made concentrated efforts to get to know others and adapt to their personalities. As Chuck puts it, "It was the difference between hitting a brick wall and having a light bulb go off."
3. Build relationships at the lower levels to get to the higher-ups. Build strength with your peers. Sometimes you have to go sideways to get to the ultimate decision-maker.
4. Learn how others learn and process information, and then adapt to them. Chuck asks directly, and finds that many people know their learning styles and will tell him. In other cases he observes closely until he figures it out. How is this person responding to different types of data? Different presentations? Chuck is visual and dynamic, always drawing pictures and diagrams, but one of his largest client groups is highly verbal and structured in their style. He noticed that they all still used bulleted Power Point slides to convey important (and sometimes unimportant) information, so he started doing exactly the same thing when meeting with them. He found that they worked better with him that way and he got better results.
5. Don't expect people to connect with you before you connect with them. Do the outreach.
6. Give to them before you ask for anything.
7. Pick the battles that you fight. How much does it cost you to be right?

As with post-holiday weight loss, improvements like this are best taken one step at a time, so instead of trying all seven tips today, pick one that resonates with you and start with that, adding the others as you gain comfort and ease.