

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

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Getting Agreement ▶ 03/11/10

Failing to agree affects results

Sheldon leads a logistics team for one of the world's largest food distributors. In our coaching, he repeatedly told me stories that went something like this: he would give explicit instructions to his direct reports about an action he wanted them to take. Then, a day or two later, he'd find out they had done something completely different than he'd expected.

He wanted me to help him fix his team. I asked if he experienced them as rebellious or defiant. He said, no, he actually experienced them as sincere, hard-working individuals who just couldn't seem to get things right.

I asked if I could challenge one of his assumptions. "You mean my assumption that they're sincere?" he asked, ready to defend his people.

"No," I said, "your assumption that your instructions are explicit."

Like many people, Sheldon assumed that because his instructions had made sense to him, they must have also made sense to his listeners. Here's the analogy I used to explain this.

Assumptions create gaps in understanding

Imagine I supervise a group of artists who are mature, talented professionals. I tell one of my artists that the background on a specific sketch has to be light blue. As I tell her that, I picture exactly which light blue marker in my rack I would use. My artist even says to me, "Right. Light blue. Got it."

But what my artist has pictured in her head is a pencil that's light blue but has a completely different shade and texture and density that what I'm expecting. When she brings me her work, I wonder why she can't get anything right!

I challenged Sheldon to stop assuming his people understood his instructions. "Don't give instructions," I said. "Get agreement."

He asked how and I answered, "After you explain something, ask them to tell you their understanding of you've just said."



“What?” He was horrified. “That would be so insulting! They’re not children.”

“But look at the results you’re getting. The gap between what you think you’ve told them and what they are delivering is serious. The only way to narrow the gap is to have them tell you what they’ve heard.”

Take responsibility for the gap

He appeared willing to consider this, so I went on. “It’s important to let them know it’s your ability to communicate you’re verifying, not their ability to listen.”

He frowned suspiciously. “How do I let them know that?”

“Tell them. Say, ‘Based on the results we’ve been getting lately, I’m concerned I may not be explaining things well. Will you tell me what you just heard me say?’ Make it about yourself, not them.”

I’ve found even the most no-nonsense managers—men and women who create performance indicators for every action—rarely take steps to check assumptions, verify understandings and get agreement. When I ask why they skip this step, I often hear, like Sheldon, that they feel that sort of questioning would sound childish, insulting or display a lack of trust. Or that they simply don’t have time.

I then point out that people who risk their lives in the air, pilots and astronauts, verify everything with written checklists and verbal verifications because the failure to do so is just too costly. Does it slow things down? Sure. Does it improve performance? Without question.

If you want results to match your expectations, don’t assume you’ve communicated clearly; ask people to tell you what they heard you say. Get agreement.

A defining leadership moment

Now imagine this. You tell your direct report that you want result “XYZ” delivered in format “ABC.” You ask him to confirm his understanding of what you just said. He says he heard that you want result “YZA” delivered in format “BCD.”

He clearly didn’t understand you, right? What’s your first thought? And what comes out of your mouth?

Your behavior in this next moment will, over time, determine whether you build your working relationships on trust, resulting in the delivery of unfiltered information, or whether you build your working relationships on hierarchy, resulting in the delivery of the information you want to hear.



If you were able to watch that instant of your behavior on video, I hope not even a shadow of impatience or frustration would be conveyed on your face. I hope not even a hint of disapproval or disappointment would be conveyed in your voice.

I hope what you would convey is that his “miss”—no matter how small or large—was totally understandable and was more likely due to you being unclear than to his inability to understand you.

This last step—accepting and owning the miscommunication—is extremely difficult. It is natural, when there are differences of opinion, to think, “He just doesn’t understand!” But of course he does understand: he understands his own thinking. And it’s different from yours. (This concept is discussed in detail in the Tip, “[Owning Miscommunications](#).”)

When you are convinced that you couldn’t possibly be any clearer expressing yourself, yet what you said still comes back muddled, well, I guess you’ll just *have* to be clearer, won’t you? What’s the alternative?

As Sheldon focused on getting agreement, he noticed one young man on his staff was consistently unable to accurately repeat back what Sheldon had said. Consequently, Sheldon began to diminish the young man’s responsibilities.

But he saw the rest of his team’s performance improve. Over time he found himself doing much less cleaning up of mistakes and managing after the fact. He found it was worth taking the time to get agreement.

Next month, I’ll turn this coin onto its other side and discuss how to disagree without being disagreeable—another important behavior on the road to *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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