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The Language of Leadership

Communication - customized for your listener - is one of the most critical elements of leadership. Here are some strategies to demystify the process.

By Libby Gill

There's an old joke... "If you're leading and nobody's following, maybe you're just taking a walk." Using language that is clear and compelling gives you the best shot at creating an engaged following and collaborative culture in your organization.

Here are some communication strategies for incorporating simple and straightforward language into your everyday vocabulary.

"This is the vision."

As a leader, you want to share your perspective on the competitive landscape of your industry with your team as often as possible. Yes, you're dealing with some proprietary and confidential matters that can't be discussed, but strive for transparency and inclusion in your communication. When you're an open book, people rightly feel that you have nothing to hide, that you trust them enough to confide in them, and that you want them on your team.

"Here's the plan."

Because you're still the boss of the organization, division, or project team - despite the increasingly popular "we don't have titles, we're all equals here" mentality - people expect you to step up and have a plan.

Look one year ahead and start working backwards, quarter by quarter, month by month, week by week. What are the results you're looking for? Be clear and concise about anticipated outcomes. Set your high-level objectives, critical tasks, milestone markers, and project ownership. Avoid ambiguity and corporate-speak - everything needs to be crystal clear to everyone on the team. Let your team or task leaders concern themselves with the details of the process and how to meet expectations. Most of all, remember to keep it simple!

"What do you need from me?"

Check in regularly - at least as often as the milestone markers you've established - to make sure everyone is on task and on time. Know what your people do well and tap into their talents. Find out what each team member needs, directly or through your managers if you're in a large organization, to get the job done effectively. Resolve conflicts quickly and give feedback frequently. Blend kindness with candor but don't waste time sugarcoating reactions or pussyfooting around problems. Not only will you make things worse, you'll teach others to follow your conflict-avoiding behavior.

"How can we improve?"

Keep a "we're good but we can always be better" attitude and encourage everyone to regularly contribute strategies and suggestions to improve the workplace. Sometimes referred to as *kaizen*, literally meaning "change for the good," after the Japanese auto manufacturers' practice of encouraging workers at all levels to offer ideas for increased quality and productivity, ongoing improvement should be part of your organizational DNA.

While you may be doing fine right now, if you aren't making ongoing enhancements to efficiency, productivity, and communication, it won't be long until your competitors bypass you. As a leader, you need to get out, ask questions, and solicit creative ideas from people at every level of the company so that continuous improvement is a team sport and not a competition.

"Woohoo. Let's celebrate!"

Celebrate success along the way. Not just the big scores, but also the small wins, including meeting your milestones. Institutionalize celebrations that fit your unique culture. A great example is the Sacred Boomerang Award that design firm Kahler Slater uses to welcome back former employees who've returned to the company after time away. Or the FANATI Award, given to a partner business by web hosting company Rackspace for outstanding customer service. Even a good old Friday afternoon beer bash just for the heck of it can increase collaboration and camaraderie. Party on!

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