



Talking Tactfully

How to communicate with your staff

By Kendall Isaac

You're all student leaders. You have a plethora of opportunities to manage your work, staff, and amidst it all, manage your life. You can crunch numbers and strategically plan with the best of them. However, while you were working on your management expertise, did you hone your communication skills as well? Those that do not know how to talk to, delegate to, and evaluate their staff soon find themselves drowning in their own ineptitude. Don't let this happen to you! Here are some tips on how to communicate effectively to and with your staff.

Give Them a Sandwich

Giving constructive feedback and performance evaluations to others can be challenging. The difficulty lies in being able to effectively balance your feedback so that it's not too harsh and yet not too soft. Don't use sharp language such as, "You were not supposed to...Why in the world did you..." or way too nice language such as, "You did a great job, but could you maybe sorta kinda next time try to maybe do..."

There's a happy medium to minimize the stress that feedback and evaluations cause on you and your employee. Use the "sandwich" technique, which lets you sandwich your constructive feedback between two "buns" of positive reinforcement. For example, if you had to tell a usually exceptional employee that his latest project was below expectations, say something like, "Bill, we're truly lucky to have you working here. The projects that you turn in are usually very well thought out and precise. However, your latest project was a little below your normal standards, as

it lacked...We need you to put a little bit more time into making it right. I'm positive that you can get this to me tomorrow and it will be top-notch as usual."

The conversation started with a positive (your projects usually are very precise), worked in some constructive feedback (your latest project was sub-par), and concluded with another dose of positive reinforcement and expectation (I'm positive that by tomorrow you can make it right). You've provided feedback, while at the same time managing to maintain his dignity and pride. More importantly, you managed to avoid damaging your working relationship.

We're in This Together

The second thing to remember when communicating with employees is to speak to them how you would want to be spoken to. Would you like someone saying, "You better..." Of course not. "We need to..." sounds so much nicer. By substituting the word "you" with the word "we," you subconsciously convey a sense of teamwork, not a dictatorship.

By saying "we," you take the sharp edge off of the directive, and make it seem like you're all in it together. And don't worry, when you say, "We need to get this floor mopped," they know that the "we" is really "you."

Another technique is to phrase the request as a question. Saying, "Could you please get the floor mopped soon?" sounds so much better than, "You need to mop that floor." The essence of the request is the same (mop the floor) but they'll do it with much more ease when it sounds more like a request than a demand. Remember, staff members like to be given options—even if

they're only perceived options. By making them feel like part of a team and by letting them know that they have a choice in what they're doing, you will make the working atmosphere better for everyone involved.

Argue the Situation, Pick the Place

In the heat of a discussion, we often only see the enemy, and we argue and attack as if winning is the only option. We fail to realize that to truly win, we must diffuse the situation and create an ally, not a bitter enemy. How is this done? By focusing on the situation—not the person. Remember, you may not agree with his work product or point-of-view, but separate that from the person. Do this by using language that removes the "person" from the situation. Saying, "This project is unacceptable" is much more effective than saying "I can't believe you turned in this mess." By focusing on the situation, and not the person, you maintain his dignity and self-respect. By doing that, you maintain his loyalty.

It's also important to take stock of where and when you approach someone about a problem. A good rule of thumb is to always praise a worker in the presence of his peers but chastise him in private. Nobody wants his fellow workers to know when he's done something wrong, but everyone enjoys public praise.

The basic premise here is to leave your ego at the door when you arrive at work. Ego is the biggest downfall of the rookie leader. He wants to "take charge" so bad that he fails before he can truly ever be considered "in charge." Everyone knows that you're the boss. When you treat the employees with dignity and respect, they'll praise you. When you communicate with them void of tact and sensitivity, they'll despise you. Remember, if they respect you, they'll give 110-percent effort. **SL**



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