

LEADERSHIP



Courageous conversation

VERY FEW LEADERS appreciate how they are perceived by others. Fewer still have a realistic understanding of the negative dynamic they create in a team, both through what they say and what they do not say.

Not long ago, I facilitated an executive team retreat for a client organization. The leader was new to her role and the organization. During the three-day retreat, the leader often referenced her former place of employment, talking specifically about the competence of her former team, how smart and strategic they were, etc. While it was not her intention to intimidate her current team, that was the result. What they heard was that they did not measure up. They weren't good enough. Her words deflated their enthusiasm and reduced their level of confidence. The impact of sharing past stories and accolades resulted in the opposite of what she was looking to achieve, which was to motivate and inspire.

Likewise, the CEO of a publicly-held company decided, when frustrated with his team, to tell them that three of them did not measure up in the opinion of board members. He went on to say that he "had their backs."

The energy in the room plummeted. The silence was deafening.

One of the team members changed the subject. No one knew what to do or say to recover.

INTENTION VS. IMPACT

Neither of these leaders intended to level their teams. In both instances they may have intended to inspire their teams, engender loyalty, and motivate them to do and be their best. They had little recognition that what they intended and the impact were not congruent.

GIVING FEEDBACK/ FEEDFORWARD TO THE BOSS

In both instances, members of the teams have asked how best to offer feedback to their bosses. They want their bosses to succeed. They are committed to their organizations.

A model of feedforward that we often teach

our clients is the RISC model. This model is used specifically when asking for a behavior change, so that while the conversation includes the behavior to be addressed, the focus is on what we need or want to have happen in the future.

The dynamics inevitably change when someone has position of power over another. However, when you can determine that your boss is really interested in feedback/feedforward, this model can work.

FEEDBACK/FEEDFORWARD IN ACTION

1. When offering feedback to your boss, you must determine his/her capacity to receive the feedback. It will be important to ask if he/she would like to receive your feedback before diving in.
2. Assuming the boss says yes, and assuming you have determined that your boss is able to receive feedback, be sure that your intentions are to support the best in your boss and your team.
3. Utilize the **RISC Model** to ask for a behavior change.
 - **REPORT** the specific behavior (even if the behavior has been repeated, use only the current experience). State the behavior only. Do not ascribe intention.
 - **IMPACT** (What was the impact for you? The team? What might it be for the organization? What was the impact on the boss?)
 - **SPECIFY** what you want instead.
 - **CONSEQUENCE** (Consider the positive consequences. What is the benefit to the boss to change his/her behavior? What might be the cost if he/she doesn't? This takes reflection on what will make a difference to your boss, not what might make a difference for you.

Here is an example of how the conversation might go.

You may begin with gratitude. "Thank you for your willingness to hear feedback from me.

I want to do all that I can to support your best leadership for the sake of the organization.

"R: In yesterday's meeting with our team, you indicated that board members have criticized a few of us and that you have our backs.

"I: When you said that the board criticized some of us, I froze. I shut down. All I could think about was: Who was criticized? Was it me? I couldn't contribute to the other topics on our agenda.

"S: If there is criticism about me, I would like for you to let me know privately.

"C: You will then have my full engagement, energy and best ideas in our meeting."

The conversation will be different if you elect to talk about the impact on his/her leadership and success. Or, if you decide to share what you believe was/is the impact on the team.

Each of these steps takes careful preparation, focusing on the behavior, not the person or your perception of the leader's motives.

It's a courageous conversation, necessary for strengthening trust and safety on any team.

Do you have the courage? ■



KAREN VERNAL

Karen Vernal is the president of Vernal Management Consultants LLC, a Milwaukee-based leadership and organizational firm. For more information, visit vernalmgmt.com.