

Intention vs. impact

Are your people hearing your true message?

We judge ourselves by our intentions. We judge others by the impact of their behavior on us.

We tend to assume that because we have good intentions, our behaviors will reflect our good intent. Think about a time when someone has been angry with you when you did something well-intentioned. It's a baffling experience, because you've judged yourself by your good intent.

Leaders must be particularly sensitive to their impact, because there is a tendency to read more into behaviors of those in positions of authority. Often, well-intentioned leaders do not appreciate the impact of their behavior on others within their organizations.

Consider executive (Tom) who consciously provides opportunities for an employee (Sue). His intention is to validate Sue's talent. He looks for special work for Sue to provide development opportunities. He gives Sue frequent extra projects. Months go by and Tom is pleased with his authentic efforts to strengthen Sue's skill set and provide her interesting, meaningful work.

Let's fast forward. Tom has the occasion to ask Sue how she feels about these extra projects, believing that the response will be quite positive. You might imagine Tom's surprise when Sue indicates that, in fact, she feels these projects don't play to her strengths. Even more to Tom's surprise, Sue proceeds to tell him that she feels "passed over" for assignments that she believes she is particularly well suited for, and instead given projects that do not provide the opportunity for her to excel. She wonders if he has her best interest in mind.

You can imagine that Tom feels he was misjudged by Sue. But at the end of the day, we are each responsible for our im-

pact. Tom has the opportunity to recover. Through candid conversation, both Sue and Tom have the opportunity to understand one another's intentions and to deepen their appreciation of one another.

In our work, we have seen the positive results when people speak and live the language of intention vs. impact.

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Several months ago, a member of our team was facilitating an off-site retreat for a leadership team. Among the members of this team, there had been serious tension and resentments in the past.

One of the exercises required the group to determine what their guiding principles would be, that is, how they would engage with one another in the workplace. Before the leaders began to discuss their recommendations for guiding principles in small groups, my colleague shared the wisdom of intention vs. impact.



As participants worked in small groups to determine guiding principles, each group recommended that the first guiding principle be: assume good intent. That guiding principle became a mantra in the organization. People were more willing to approach an issue with curiosity rather than judgment because they assumed that others were behaving with good intent. That single change transformed the dynamics of the leadership team and led to much more productive discussions.

We have all had the experience of real-

izing that the impact of our behavior or communication was not what we intended it to be. In those situations, what can we do when we realize that our intention and impact are not congruent?

Begin by asking yourself these questions:

- » What just occurred?
- » What signals did I receive from my colleague, friend, manager that my intention and impact did not match?
- » What was my responsibility in

the interaction?

- » What could I have done differently?

Take action as quickly as you can:

- » Communicate your appreciation that your intention and impact were not in alignment.
- » Invite and listen to the other person's perspective.
- » Take responsibility for your actions/words.
- » Indicate how you could have managed the communication more effectively.
- » Ask if there is anything else that the other person needs to hear from you.

In any relationships, we have the opportunity to reconcile the difference between our intentions and impact. It requires a dose of courage and humility. When we are willing to take the necessary steps, we reflect the words of Douglas Adams: "I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I have ended up where I intended to be." ■

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