

#20: Be Specific By Patricia Wheeler

Dominic, visibly shaken, entered my office. He had called in a panic earlier. He was a big man with a slight Eastern European accent, a brilliant scientist who was now tasked with supervising other scientists on his team. He called because he knew my specialty is working with leaders from highly technical backgrounds. He was fearful of being fired. He and his wife now had a young son to support and the stakes were high. He needed to keep this job.

His problem was a common one. A subordinate, formerly a peer, was challenging Dominic's leadership, criticizing him openly to peers and superiors. Dominic feared this scientist, a well-known researcher whom the company could ill afford to lose, would turn his boss against him. The conflict came to a head over the execution of a project crucial to the company's survival. He was flushed with anxiety as he recounted the events of the past few months.

Interestingly enough, Dominic described his long-standing relationship with this scientist as mostly genial, although their different scientific backgrounds fueled a great deal of competition and disagreement. A good hearted and well meaning man, Dominic was clear that his skills lay more in scientific analysis and synthesis than in the interpersonal skills needed to lead others. I listened to his story, and said, "Let me suggest two things to do differently with your subordinate and tell you three things you're already doing right."

First, you need to separate your role as a leader with your role as a scientist. Have a dialogue with this individual. Ask him directly about his concerns, and express appreciation when he does so. Meet regularly to discuss his views; if he knows you are listening to him, he may be less likely to criticize you behind your back.

Second, tell him specifically what he is doing well; he may not know that you value his contribution on the project. Humans are emotional beings; any behavior that is reinforced is more likely to be repeated.

Then I told Dominic, here are the things that you are already doing right:

You are keeping your boss in the loop by having regular conversations with him and telling him about this problem upfront.

You are asking your boss for his suggestions and advice on the situation; this strengthens the connection between yourself and upper management.

You are asking your boss to tell you when he wants you to change your approach to the situation.

This is called transparent leadership.

Dominic asked me, is it really that simple? Well, the answer is yes.....and no. As the saying goes, common sense is often not common practice.

But why aren't we as specific and rigorous about clarifying our expectations and requests with people as we are in our rigor with data? We tend to expect people,

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especially extremely bright people, to already know what they need to change....and what they're doing well.

What behavioral scientists know is that we have a hard-wired tendency to notice and focus on what's missing, incomplete and unsatisfying. A Russian scientist, Bluma Zeigarnik, discovered this effect and wrote about it in the 1920s.

I've spent the last two decades working with technically gifted, blazingly smart, unbelievably hard working people. Among them are rocket scientists, surgeons, engineers and pharmaceutical researchers. In their technical training, they learned to be great individual contributors, expected to do their genius work in isolation. In my own education, I learned that earning a Ph.D. is not a team sport.

The attorneys and financial professionals I coach have similar tendencies. Trained with a laser-like focus to spot flaws and missing pieces, we hire them to be vigilant, not trusting, and clearly not warm and fuzzy. But we humans don't check our personalities at the door when we move into a leadership role.

These very bright contributors must learn to balance their natural analytic tendencies with acknowledging what is already working, already complete, and moving in the desired direction. And they must share this knowledge with others....up, down and across their organization.

Our consultation concluded for the day, and a more relaxed Dominic rose to leave. He shook my hand and his eyes became misty. "Thank you," he said, "for telling me what I'm doing right."

Action step: Notice specifically what your people are doing right. Then tell them clearly. Not only is this approach more meaningful than a message of "good job," it moves people more effectively toward their desired outcome. And be equally specific about where you want them to raise the bar on their performance.

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Patricia Wheeler is an executive coach and consultant who helps smart people become better leaders. As Managing Partner of the Levin Group LLC, she has spent over 15 years specializing in organizational systems dynamics and coaching senior leaders. A distance-learning expert, Patricia uses an action-oriented and results-based approach to coach teams within global organizations, leading to increased synergy and bottom-line results. She publishes Leading News in collaboration, renowned executive coach Marshall Goldsmith. You may contact Patricia by E-mail at Patricia@TheLevinGroup.com or by telephone at 404 377-9408.

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