



The No.1 Mistake Leaders Make

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The answer might surprise you

I was asked recently what my No. 1 tip would be to today's leaders and managers who want higher results and productivity from their employees. My answer? Hands down: Stop ignoring behavior you don't want repeated. This is the No. 1 mistake leaders make, and they make it often.

Most people do not like confrontation. As a result, they tend to rationalize, look away or make excuses for behaviors, attitudes and actions— even if they find those actions detrimental to the overall success of the team or organization. But ignoring behaviors you don't like does not help the situation or the person. In fact, it does the exact opposite. You give them the message that their behavior is acceptable and, in fact, you encourage them to continue acting the same way in the future. You have now become part of the problem instead of leading them away from the problem.

Leaders always have communication choices when it comes to handling difficult people and situations: You can give positive feedback or negative feedback. Or you can choose to avoid and ignore— hoping that it just goes away by itself. (No way will that ever happen!)

A Little Psychology 101

We were born to want positive feedback more than anything. There are five main ways to give positivity: people want to be loved, liked, appreciated, recognized and respected. Therefore, whenever we get what we perceive to be positive, our brains store that behavior into a file that says "Good job! That worked—do it again!"

On the other hand, we were born to avoid negative feedback. In the presence of fair, respectful and assertive negative feedback, our brains say "Hmmm, that wasn't the reaction I was looking for. Let's try another approach." (Very important note: Negative feedback that is unfair, abusive, humiliating, sarcastic or punitive will rarely deter behavior long-term, it instead causes the person to become manipulative, resentful and passive-aggressive. This is definitely not a good leadership choice.)

Here's the catch, though: In the absence of any feedback at all (ignoring and avoiding), our brains register those as a positive reaction. So if an employee is coming in late, missing meeting deadlines, gossiping, unable to embrace change, bringing their personal life to work, refusing to be a team player, etc., and they get no reaction from you at all—because you attempt to avoid confrontation you choose not to give them appropriate feedback—they will most likely repeat that behavior again and again. Except now you, the leader, have condoned their actions and have become a part of the problem instead of a mediator and role model working with them to eliminate the problem.

Your Four Choices

1 Give positive feedback for a negative behavior.

"What???" you might be asking. "Why would I ever give positive feedback when I don't like what's going on?" Leaders do this all the time. Think about it. If I was to come into your business and asked you to identify your most marginal employees, and I watched those employees throughout the day, here is what I would find. They come in late. Or leave early. They take longer lunches. They aren't asked to do the tough jobs. They aren't given the most difficult customers. They turn things in late and people cover for them. Or others do the work for them to get the job done. They have attitudes that affect morale. They whine and complain. And they still get paid. Just the same as the employees working hard to do the job right. For many people a paycheck is the only reward they are looking for. If they can get away with acting the way they do and still manage to collect company money, then they are going to change or improve. A paycheck is often positive feedback for a job not well done.

2 Give negative feedback in a positive way.

Discuss the situation as soon as you can after noticing the behavior. Be firm but fair. State and explain your position, respectfully and honestly. Let them know why the behavior is not productive for them, their team and the organization. Be prepared for defensiveness, hurt or even an argument. Many people do not take negative feedback well—even when presented in an appropriate way. Often people will try to steer the conversation in another direction or blame other people or situations for the problem. But stay on track and stay calm. Avoid being hurtful or angry. Explain what you expect to happen in the future and what the consequences are if things don't change. Let them know you are on their side but as a leader it is your job to make sure things run smoothly and that each person plays their part in making that happen.

3 Give negative feedback in a negative way.

Simply put, people resent being mistreated. And rightly so. As a leader, you have to be the example of how people should act. Yelling, sarcasm, the silent treatment, favoritism, manipulation and tantrums are examples of behavior leaders cannot ever resort to. Employees watch their leaders for clues on how to act and treat other people. When leaders use negative techniques to get results, it will never be the results they are looking for. This type of negativity will often send employees underground feeling angry, hurt and resentful, just waiting for a chance to sabotage and undermine their leaders, their team and their organization. It may also demoralize employees to the extent that they cannot function as creative, energetic and productive members of the team.

4 Choose to ignore and avoid.

If confrontation is so scary that a leader consistently chooses to avoid difficult conversations, then they should not be in leadership. Good leadership is about coaching, mentoring, training, teaching, motivating and encouraging teams to focus on their strengths while helping them be aware of their limitations so they can be the best they can be. Good leaders give a full of praise and recognition for a job well done. They give credit where credit is due. But, they also understand the value of tackling the tough issues employees may face throughout their career. They are not afraid to set boundaries and have high expectations. They are rigorous about making sure that their team is focused on doing the right thing for the right reasons. They understand psychologically that the absence of their feedback when faced with behaviors that are not helping the team is the same as a positive reaction and they encourage the behaviors to continue with their blessing. Avoiding non-productive behaviors has no place when leading a team to success.

Connie Podesta has been a leadership keynote speaker for more than 25 years and is one of the keynote speakers for RFMA's 2014 conference. Podesta's session at the conference is being developed by Females in Facilities.