

Management In Real Life

by Kevin Herring

The power of language is probably one of the least appreciated elements of supervision and change management. It can be used for effect to manipulate or coerce behavior, or it can be used for disclosure and engagement for positive change.

Yelling, bullying, threatening, and using intimidating body language are all examples of language for effect. Most of us have experienced a supervisor, manager, or co-worker who has used language in this way in an attempt to effect behavior. For example, I once knew a supervisor who regularly had employees in tears with his verbal abuse to push employees to perform. Since he was always dissatisfied with the results I wondered why he never understood that it wasn't working.

Other uses of language for effect include withholding information, deceiving, or creating an impression for the listener. I can recall a vice president who told a plant manager that he was the likely choice for a promotion and the decision would be certain as long as the manager didn't make any serious mistakes. This plant manager soon learned that the same conversation had occurred between the same vice president and another manager. The vice president rationalized that "a little competition was good for the company."

The result of using language for effect is not greater employee commitment, but rather greater distrust, reduced energy, and lowered commitment. We see much the same in transformation programs that use catchy slogans, newsletters that report only positive news, and executive speeches that shield employees from bad news. Instead of creating the intended morale and employee commitment boost, cynicism, suspicion, and resignation results.

Language for disclosure and engagement, on the other hand, is the language of empowering people. It means that we treat others like adults who are capable of handling feedback and managing their lives to deal with difficulties. As a manager, I once was involved with terminating an employee who had repeated behavior problems. Although upset at the time, she later expressed appreciation for our frankness in expressing what she needed to change and said it was very helpful for her professional growth. Another example is with a manager who disclosed to engineers the fact that there was a possibility of a program being canceled. The manager acknowledged that such disclosure presented a risk of engineers immediately leaving for other employers, but he chose to disclose the issues anyway. In each of these cases the open dialogue that ensued helped employees to use their energy for better decision making, preparation for the future, and greater contributions to organization success.

Although we all want to be treated as adults with openness and honesty, we have a tendency to control the information we pass on to others. However, using language for disclosure and engagement is a much more powerful channel for enabling positive personal and organizational change.

Kevin Herring is President of Tucson-based Ascent Management Consulting. He has over 15 years of experience in organization effectiveness and change.