From the Director:

April is here … finally!

We are all grateful to see signs of spring, throw off our overcoats, and sit (even for a few moments) on a campus bench in the sun.

Without using the actual terms, our newsletter this month focuses on several of our University-wide competencies: Communication, People Development and Teamwork.

We all have a responsibility to communicate well and, as a manager, you have the additional responsibility of supporting the professional growth of your staff members. Day-to-day interactions are critical to the successful management of a good team. Please take a few moments to review the following examples of manager/employee interactions to determine how you might have handled the situation.

Here’s to a productive and happy spring!

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A Broad Perspective

• Have you ever been knocked off center by an unexpected comment?
• Have you ever been surprised by opposition to your plans?

Most of us have experienced a setback or wake-up call when we least expected it. It can feel like we stumbled into a sinkhole – and we are surprised to be there. How did this happen?

We all take things for granted. If we’ve got a good idea, we think others will agree. When we want to get something done, we expect others will put their shoulder to the wheel. When our intentions are good, we expect people will understand us. But that’s not always the case.

In the rush of getting things done, it’s easy to forget that there are many ways to look at every situation. Not everyone sees the situation from our distinct vantage point. A narrow perspective gives us limited information as we blithely steam ahead with one goal (our goal) in mind. Then when we land in that sinkhole, we look up with astonishment and ask, “What happened?”

continued

When we rely exclusively on our own knowledge, we suffer from a shortage of information.
Let’s take a look at a few situations that we can learn from:

Example #1 – Ben Speaks Up
As you hand off a task to Ben, an employee who reports to you, he says, “I’m getting tired of taking on work that everyone else doesn’t want to do. It seems I get to do all the difficult, tedious tasks around here.”

What Happened?
You are surprised! Ben has always been agreeable and reliable. In the past he welcomed new tasks. What do you do now? There are only a few things you know for sure:
• You are surprised by his remark.
• You count on him for many things.
• Ben always comes through.

Don’t Blurt!
When we are surprised by something there is a tendency to blurt out the first thought that comes to mind. Our initial thoughts tend to be filled with assumptions. For instance, you might say, “What’s the matter, Ben? Are you having a bad day?” An impulsive response might be exactly the wrong thing to say.

What’s Up With Ben?
What new information can you learn that will help you to understand and honor Ben’s vantage point? What you need to find out is:
• What is it that Ben wants right now?
• Why is that important to him?

Tell Me More
By asking Ben to tell you more, your perspective is broadened. It could be that Ben feels taken for granted. It could be that he thinks you are being unfair. It could be that he thinks his coworkers are not pulling their weight. Ben’s perspective is important – you need to know what it is before you make your response. Don’t get stuck on who is right and who is wrong. Instead, get more information on the full picture (a broad perspective) before you make a move.

Example #2 – The Meeting
You and Lisa are colleagues who report to the same manager. In a project meeting with several people, including your manager, Lisa abruptly disagrees with your idea and loudly says, “That’s not going to work; that’s been tried before and it didn’t work then and it’s not going to work now.”

What Happened?
It’s an embarrassing moment because you feel dismissed by Lisa. She doesn’t seem to grasp that your idea has lots of new elements. Though you feel irritated and angry, there are only a few things you know for sure:
• Lisa does not understand your idea.
• Lisa doesn’t like what she heard.
• Your idea is different from what’s been done in the past.
• You are feeling annoyed.

Tell Me More
You could decide to forge ahead and make your key points more forcefully, but that’s not what’s needed. What helps in most every group discussion is to involve and engage people in contributing to a **shared pool of information**. You could ask, “Can we hear other thoughts and comments on this idea?” You may learn that a key ingredient is missing; you may find little support among the group; or, you may find that others are pleased with your idea, despite Lisa’s objections. In any event, you will have created a broader perspective for yourself and for the group. A bigger perspective = a better decision.

What Else?
• Don’t waste energy by arguing against Lisa’s points.
• Decide whether a follow up, private conversation with her is useful.
• Use your listening skills to cultivate understanding and agreement.
• Ask for more clarity about how group input shapes the decision.

A broad perspective invites new information in and opens a path forward.
Example #3 – Steve
You’ve recently been promoted to a management position. Now, you are managing the people who formerly were your coworkers. Your first staff meeting is going along well and people are participating in the discussion. Then Steve says, “I don’t know why you are asking us what we think about this; you make the decision. You wanted to be in charge – well, you’re in charge. Just tell us what you want us to do.”

What Happened?
This is an unexpected development. And, it’s awkward for everyone. People are looking to you to handle this. Steve is a straightforward kind of guy, but you didn’t expect this from him. Because you know Steve well, you can make a good guess about what’s really motivating him. But it would be a guess. The only things you know for sure are:
• Steve wants you to make the decision.
• Steve wants you to tell the group what to do.
• Your work group is watching how you handle the situation.

Tell Me More
You can’t ignore Steve’s remarks, but you don’t need to dispute them. It’s not going to be helpful to label Steve’s behavior. Move on by saying, “My style of managing is to be as inclusive as I can. I value what each of you brings to the table. Some of you have expertise I don’t have; some of you are good at thinking analytically about things; and some of you have insight I don’t have. Together, we can do some good work. I expect to make some decisions by myself, to delegate decision making when I can, and to encourage group consensus when it is appropriate. However, I am accountable for all the decisions, so I have a deep interest in how they are made.”

Remember
• You don’t need to engage directly with Steve on this issue.
• You get to decide how you will manage others.
• It is OK if others don’t happen to like your style.
• Actions speak louder than words.

Follow up
The only valuable question here is: Is your management style effective?
You could privately ask people “What should I keep doing? What should I start doing? What should I stop doing?” Then, figure out from this broad perspective of information what works best for you and your work group. Then, carry on.