Mobley's Musings: The virtues of the virtual

A global organization that my client works for holds all its meetings virtually but with cameras off. Their reasoning is that they don't want people who work from home to feel they have to dress up for calls. Carrie is just three years out of college, but she is wise beyond her years, having worked in her family's business since she was 12. But in her first job out of school, she felt her ideas were discounted because of her age, leading her to find another job. She's much happier in her current organization, where she's gotten a lot of positive feedback for her ideas and recommendations. When the company held its first in-person leadership team meeting, her colleagues were shocked to see how young she is. Carrie wonders if establishing credibility among some colleagues would have been more difficult if they had seen her before they got to know her.

On the television show "The Voice," judges evaluate a singer's performance with their backs turned. Professional orchestras employ similar approaches when auditioning musicians. With performers concealed from view, a judge is less likely to be influenced by their gender, race, age or physical appearance.

Whether subconsciously or consciously, we may harbor biases that keep people—and organizations—from realizing their potential. The more we can do to prevent biases from affecting our decisions, the better.

Another client had been feeling left out because he worked at an off-site location while his team members were at headquarters. He missed the "water cooler" chats and other informal communication that happened in the halls. But now that everyone is working from home he feels more connected with the team: they are all living the same reality. With leadership working to make sure everyone feels a part of the team, he is finally enjoying a sense of inclusion.

Having discovered the virtues of being virtual, how can we build on best practices that surfaced out of necessity to create a more inclusive environment when we go back to work?

Sandy

Ask Sandy

How to work with a critical boss

Have you ever had a boss who always managed to find something wrong with your work no matter what you did, making you feel insecure and lose confidence in your ability? It's a common concern among clients, and even if their boss's criticisms are well-founded, they wonder if there's anything they can do about all that soul-crushing negativity.

Rather than take the critical feedback personally, I counsel clients to recognize that some people have a personality preference that leads them to look for things that are wrong. Their error-seeking missiles don't come from a negative place, but from a desire to improve things. When I read a document, for example, my eyes immediately land on typos or garbled sentences. It's not that I don't see what's good about the document; it's just that my orientation is to find ways to make things better. If there were no problems with the document, I would not push to find something wrong in it. But knowing my tendency, I have had to train myself to give positive feedback before pointing out things to be corrected.

Some leaders feel it's their job to add value and that means finding ways to improve work sent for their review. The flip side is that they see no added value in pointing out what is good about the work. If no news is good news, then no feedback is good feedback. But for the employee who needs to know what is working, the lack of feedback isn't helpful.

When a boss only provides critical feedback, it's best to thank them for making the product better and then say it would be helpful to know for future work if there was anything particularly good in the product. If the boss seems allergic to positivity, you may have to lead a little. For example, you could ask, "Was the executive summary sufficiently clear and to the point? Was there enough data to substantiate the report's conclusions?" Over time you can help a boss or colleague who only sees problems to overcome their blind spots and acknowledge positive elements as well.

If you assume that critical feedback is intended to help you, not break you, it can be welcomed instead of rejected. That simple change in perspective can lead to a more positive relationship with the boss. And you can experience feedback as something that makes you stronger.

Learning for Leaders: Balance your feedback by sharing what team members did well with ideas for making their work better. Couching your feedback by saying "the work would be even better if…" makes it easier to accept than detailing everything that is wrong.

Coaches Corner: Listen for your clients' orientations toward feedback and help them take a more balanced approach.

If you have questions you'd like Sandy to address in future newsletters, email them to sandy@learningadvantageinc.com

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Building Individual and Organizational Change-Ability

Now that most businesses understand that change is the only constant in this world, they are struggling with how to deal with the many changes they must make to remain competitive. Indeed, an organization's competitive options are directly linked to its employees' ability to accept and handle constant change.

Changes by Degree

Change means giving up an identity for a new way of being or substituting one thing for another. How organizations manage change — and the success they have in dealing with it — depends on whether change is viewed as an event or a process. If change is viewed as an event, the tendency is to complete it [OR to get it over with] and move on to the next initiative. If, on the other hand, change is considered a process, we are more apt to nurture and support it on an ongoing basis, and the change will have a greater likelihood of succeeding. For this reason, it is often clearer to refer to the event as the change and the process of changing as the transition.

There are three degrees of change:

- incremental,
- transitional, and
- transformational.

Incremental involves the least amount of change. Examples of incremental change are a company that wants to increase profits from 7 percent to 7.3 percent or a copier company seeking to extend its product line to include color copiers. These changes may require better processes, new marketing plans, and administrative adjustments, but generally they can be achieved with little disruption to the systems in place.

The second degree of change, transitional, occurs when an organization moves from one state to another clearly defined state. A company changing its finance and human resources departments from centralized to decentralized organizations would be undergoing transitional change. It is more complex and far-reaching than incremental change, but the goal of the new state is clear.

Transformational change involves the greatest change: an organization recognizes that change is needed, but it is not clear what the final state will be. This type of change presents the greatest challenge precisely because the future is unclear. The former "Big Eight" accounting firms have undergone a long period of transformational change as they have merged and significantly broadened their scope and identity from traditional accounting and auditing to professional services; such as management consulting, business process re-design, and change management.

Willingness to Change

When organizations want to make any degree of change, they can only do so if the people within the organization are willing to change. Research has shown that a person's ability to accept a change depends on whether it is seen as positive or negative, and the more the person feels he or she has some choice in the matter, the more the change will be considered positive.

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