JUICY WORK NEWS

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Mobley's Musings: Talking Isn't Connecting

I often hear people claim that one reason they attend conferences, meetings, and even cocktail parties is to make connections. But when I observe their approach, I wonder how much connecting is really going on. Admittedly, joining a conversation among a group of strangers can be nerve-wracking. As a result, I think people adopt a self-centered versus other-centered perspective in conversations. After all, talking about themselves is a subject they've very familiar with.

I see that dynamic when people come up with a pat personal story; they share with whomever they meet. Larry relates how he got his company to upgrade its software. Karen talks about how she led a project to move data to the cloud. Kevin explains about how he increased his company's profits. They tell the same story repeatedly without considering whether the story is relevant to the listeners. And often I notice the listeners slip away at the first opportunity.

Real connection is not driven by feeling the need to talk. Connection begins by adopting a mindset of true interest in the other person and a desire to understand what they care about. We learned in coaching classes that the best questions come from deep listening. When another person is talking and you give them your full attention, thoughtful questions come easily and show the other person that you're interested in getting to know them. This usually leads to them asking questions about you, but it is fine if it doesn't. When people feel listened to and heard, they are more willing to connect with you.

Feedback Finesse

The Finer Points of Feedback

In working with leaders on improving the feedback they give to their managers, I focus on ways they can bolster their positive feedback and approaches to help them handle difficult situations.

Most leaders are good at articulating what their managers have done well, and by putting strengths and weaknesses in the context of their managers' aspirations their feedback becomes more valuable. Leslie is a strong performer, standing head and shoulders above her peers. But she rarely helps her peers grow or contributes to their success. Her manager considered Leslie's lack of support for her peers as a developmental issue because she would likely be promoted over her peers and become their manager. Without

If you find yourself in business or social situations with unfamiliar people, relax and trust that by being open, authentic, and curious, connection will occur.

Ask Sandy
What to do about chain jumpers?

I have heard it from both sides: managers who complain of direct reports going over their head and taking their concerns to their boss or HR and staffers who feel their concerns won't be handled fairly by their immediate managers. In both cases, not following the chain of command invites problems. When an employee doesn't follow the proper channels, the manager can be blindsided about a problem and receive critical feedback from their boss when they weren't even aware there was a problem. The result is a negative dynamic between the employee, their manager, and the boss — along with a loss of trust and a missed opportunity to improve and strengthen communication between all three individuals.

To keep people from becoming chain jumpers, managers should regularly ask for feedback from their direct reports. It doesn't have to be a formal written survey. In fact, it's probably more useful for informal feedback to come during a conversation because it allows for follow-up questions. In regular staff meetings, the manager can ask what is working for the team and what needs to improve. The manager can probe even deeper by asking, for example, "What am I doing that helps you do your jobs? Would it help you be more effective if I did more of something, less of something, or did something differently?" It's important that the manager listen and be open minded. It's not the time to explain or be defensive. That kind of pushback can signal that the manager isn't really interested in their team's feedback.

The manager's boss and/or the HR representative have important roles to play when presented with a chain jumper. They should first ask whether the employee brought their concern to their manager. If they had not, these leaders should require them to do so before weighing in on the matter. If for some

that context, Leslie might not understand the importance of investing in peer relationships. Instead of just citing an "area for improvement," her manager provided developmental feedback that motivated Leslie to address the issue.

Sometimes staff have higher opinions of their performance than their boss. Kevin thought his performance was exceptional, and considering just his specific duties, he was definitely a star. But Kevin was not a team player: his colleagues could be drowning in work but when he finished his tasks, Kevin would leave. In this case, his manager needed to revise Kevin's job description and performance metrics to reinforce the importance of teamwork. While Kevin's manager praised his work, he made it clear that if others on the team couldn't meet a deadline, the entire team failed, including Kevin.

A staff member who hears and accepts feedback but doesn't change their behavior can be frustrating. I suggest that at the end of a performance conversation, the manager tell the person to reflect on the feedback and create a plan to address the development areas. This assignment gives the person time to absorb the feedback and take ownership for addressing

reason the employee feels uncomfortable talking to their manager, the senior manager and/or HR can offer to facilitate a conversation between them, which will give them insight into the issue and the working relationship between the employee and their manager.

If the senior manager and/or HR intercede without allowing the employee's manager to be part of the discussion, the employee comes away the worse for it: they have forfeited the chance to develop important skills in asking for what they need; they look weak in the eyes of their manager; and they may be branded a tattletale by their peers. The manager doesn't fare well either. When they see a direct report has been allowed to go around them, they may feel unsupported by leadership, their ability to hold staff accountable undermined, and their motivation to advance as a leader damaged.

The reason for a chain of command is not to restrain employees from raising concerns, and there are certainly situations that may warrant going over an immediate manager's head, such as egregious instances of harassment or abuse. Deployed correctly and followed effectively, a chain of command can help employees learn how to discuss and negotiate concerns with their manager, even regarding difficult topics.

If you have any questions you'd like Sandy to address in future newsletters, email them to:
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the deficits. If the employee comes back with a good plan, the manager should offer support and encouragement. If the plan is lacking, the manager should point out areas that still need addressing and suggest possible steps.

The most challenging situations are when a staff member doesn't accept the feedback and blames others for their poor performance or claims circumstances beyond their control kept them from doing a good job. The manager should ask what the person did to overcome those obstacles. If they have no answer, it should be pointed out that overcoming obstacles is part of their job. In almost any endeavor, we will encounter problems or setbacks; successful people face those challenges, find ways to overcome them, and in the process of doing so learn something new or develop an important skill.

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