



Management and Performance Associates – April 2005

Leading with difficult behaviors

Not long ago we had a chance to facilitate a meeting in which top executives were supposed to define the content of a training program to improve peer communication. One would imagine that such a mature and professional group would be an example in how to communicate well. Far from that...

The meeting started without a clear agenda and with the worst possible question: “So, which program are we going to choose”? It was an invitation to jump to solutions, without analyzing alternatives, and obviously ignoring all the causes for poor communication among peers.

From the very beginning there were two clearly defined groups: The shouting faction, interrupting and imposing their points of view by screaming “let me finish”; and the quiet ones, too scared to voice their ideas.

This facilitation challenge allowed us to identify some behavioral patterns:

Joey, the head screamer, had no problem invading everybody’s conversation. His goal was to convince them. In his mind, an equation: the higher the volume, the higher the persuasion. The others were terrified at this behavior, and obviously, did not say a word.

Angela would wait three seconds after a colleague finished his/her comments to make an intervention. She considered Joey’s behavior as a personal attack on her. Joey, by his turn, was bothered with Angela’s moments of silence. He could not see the valuable reflecting opportunity they presented.

Tony, somewhere in between the two groups, would interrupt when he considered necessary to add a word to stimulate the dialogue.

Worse, there was a group of three or four people, in a corner, quiet and showing no energy whatsoever, which never had a chance to clarify their points of view. Obviously, no one cared to ask them.

Some facilitation hints that every leader should apply in similar situations:

1. Shouting is never an option. A facilitator should ensure that everyone expresses his or her wants and needs, in a calm and relaxed way. When we notice high emotions around the room, a suggestion is to inquire: “You seem bothered by the discussion. Tell us about your concerns.”

2. Careful with the quiet ones. Many times silence does not equate to agreement. A leader should involve them in the discussion, in order to get their points of view. Simply ask them: “What is your opinion on the issue?”

3. Get the whole package. What they are saying and what they are not saying. Words do not represent the whole message—Quite the opposite. Pay attention to the tone and the non-verbal communication. Be especially attentive of irony, the speed, the moment, and “guess” the intention of a comment.

4. Listening is as important as speaking. Listening allows us to reflect on the issue, refocus, and when we participate again, it will be an added value contribution.

5. Everyone has a different style. We need flexibility to understand and adapt to others. Being different does not mean you're crazy. Effective teams understand that differences act as a complement to our competencies. Not a disadvantage.

See you next time. We welcome your feedback.

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