

CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?



Tune in to What Teams Ask of Their Leaders

By Mary Tomlinson with John Dreyer

Employees are a lot like the fellow in the Verizon commercial who seems to be walking every square inch of planet Earth looking for clear communication signals. But while the inveterate cell-phone hiker always manages to be connected, most employees seem to be traversing a boundless grid of communication dead spots. They participate in a vast array of HR programs -- from executive coffees to departmental chats, from employee retreats to company forums, from workshops to surveys -- each time asking "Can you hear me now? Can you hear me now?" All too often, the results are sounds of silence.

And what is it that members of corporate teams want their leaders to hear? Consistently, they have six requests that, given careful thought by leaders, will help them make greater contributions toward building value for the company, its stakeholders and themselves.

1. Lead me or get out of the way. A successful leader is generally popular. But a popular leader is not necessarily a successful one. In the words of one observer, a fellow named James Crook, "A man who wants to lead the orchestra must turn his back on the crowd". Another way to look at it is to ask, "If a leader isn't going to take his people anywhere, what good is he?" The leader who makes decisions to please superiors or make the troops happy is going to be long on popularity and short on career. Both constituencies eventually will revolt because decisions reached by a desire to make everybody love you result in teams that tread water and eventually sink. However, leaders who make and stick with tough decisions based on a well-considered and original strategic vision win the respect of superiors and the loyalty of their teams.

2. Give us a role to model. NBA great Charles Barkley more than once has informed parents that they shouldn't expect athletes to serve as role models for their children. Well, he was wrong, and so are leaders who have the same philosophy about their roles in relation to their teams.

Like star athletes, leaders walk in the spotlight every time they are on stage and often when they are not, even if they don't bask in it. Team members watch them closely, hoping to find traits to emulate, behavior to follow, a thought process to adapt. They watch to see how their bosses respond to challenges, how they deal with people, how they organize work, what drives them, where they derive inspiration, whether they value originality. The pressure on leaders is always to be on their A-Game. Time and again, team members adopt the boss's traits - the good ones and the bad. But without fail, team members say that they want leaders who will teach them traits that help them get ahead in their own careers.

3. Show me how to create value. Leaders can be a lot like the little girl in a recent "Non Sequitur" comic strip who tells her father that she is taking advantage of a window of opportunity, "filling the void as America's new domestic diva." When dad tells her, "You can start by cleaning your room," she replies, "Oh, puh-leeze, daddy . . . divas have minions for that sort of thing." Such leadership is as cliched as "Do as I say and not as I do," and as effective as an umbrella in hurricane. Teamwork is not "a lot of people doing what I say," as the marketing executive of a well-known technology company once put it.

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Most team players will give 100 percent if they see their captain giving 110 percent to achieve set goals. Conversely, they will burn a lot of energy finding creative ways to give less if they think their leader is not going above and beyond. Bosses derive the most value from their employees when they themselves are perceived to be creating value.

4. "Why does your bad day have to be my bad day?" Leaders set the tone. Over time, employees develop "boss antennae" -- sensory tools for determining the boss's daily mood. Simultaneously, they perfect behaviors that reflect the atmosphere being created by the boss. When a leader bludgeons the troops with the weight of his or her own responsibilities by way of anger, frustration, or just plain crankiness, team members adopt defensive positions, try to erect cloaking shields and aspire only to survive the workday. In other words, productivity and creativity suffer. On the other hand, when the leader masks a bad day and exudes confidence and optimism, the troops are energized toward discovery and accomplishment. Bottom line: those who can command themselves can lead others successfully.

5. Teach me to deal with mistakes. Sometimes employees feel like the person who answered the want ad for "someone who is responsible." "I'm the one you want," the applicant boasted. "On my last job, every time anything went wrong, they said I was responsible." These are the folks who work for executives who think that subordinates' mistakes are inexcusable. And frequently, executives who come down hardest on their teams' mistakes are perfectionists who mask their own blunders and transfer their own sense of failure to others in their ranks. Such executives create environments where: 1. The fear of making a mistake permeates and paralyzes the organization. 2. The potential for creativity, risk taking and discovery is eliminated. 3. The delusion of attainable perfection is transferred. It's the perfect vicious cycle. Fear to fail, and you will, which heightens your fear of failing. Executives who recognize and admit their own mistakes teach their teams that failure is a necessary component of success. In this way, they imbue their workforce with the confidence to take risks and the knowledge that they can recover and benefit from mistakes.

6. "Hey, what am I? Invisible?" Bosses are all too often like the father in the Sprint commercial who is telling the "phone counselor" that he wants to communicate better with his son, whatshisname, who plays whatchamacallit at whatever school he is attending. Like sons and daughters, team members see themselves as possessing particular talents that they believe contribute to and are necessary to the success of the group. When the boss speaks to them, he or she needs to balance between inspiring them as a team and recognizing them as individuals rather than as stock in a sheep herd.

Good leaders understand this and take the time to know their players. And they make the effort to recognize the particular contributions of individual team members. **Let them know that you CAN hear them now.** Good leaders listen to their employees. They recognize that the men and women they have chosen for their teams are interested in success for the team as well as for themselves. And they remember that, while the chemistry and dynamics of a team are directed ultimately by the chief, they do not all generate from the chief. They understand that when good leaders meet the needs of their teams, teams meet the goals of the leaders.