

Effective leaders understand the power of 'we'

Shortly after I began consulting, I was having a conversation with a client when they interrupted mid-sentence:



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"You know what I like about you?" they asked.

"What's that?"

"You always talk about 'we,' like you're a part of our team, not some outsider simply coming in to tell us what to do."

As leaders, how we lead is just as important to those following as the desired destination.

Utilizing inclusive pronouns (we, us, our) rather than exclusive (you, I, your, mine) is a small but

powerful mechanism for leaders. It sends a clear message that "we're in this together."

Obviously, when recognizing someone for a job well done, it's more appropriate to use "you." Likewise, when discussing a shortcoming on your part, it's best to own it with "I" or "my."

Language is a telltale indicator for me when interviewing candidates. I keep a mental scorecard of the candidate's use of "I" versus "we" when discussing prior accomplishments. Too many "I did" statements and the deeds themselves take a backseat to my conclusion that they are not a team player.

Of course, words are just icing on the cake. The real proof is in how a leader leads. Perhaps there is no better indication of this than how decisions are made.

Research conducted by the Center for Management and Organizational Effectiveness found that a leader's decision-making style dramatically impacts whether employees sign up to follow:

■ When an authoritative style was used, the direction was simply ordered up. Data showed followers

were split almost 50-50 between those resisting the decision and those who complied. Only a sliver of employees were truly committed to making the decision successful.

■ When a persuasive style was used, leaders took the time to explain the decision. This resulted in equal thirds of followers classifying themselves as resistant, compliant and committed.

■ Finally, when a collaborative style was used, leaders gathered input from followers and involved them in the decision. This resulted in almost 80 percent of followers being committed to its success, with the remainder evenly split between compliant and resistant.

Obviously, the situation often dictates which style is appropriate. A crisis may not allow the time necessary for a collaborative debate.

Four factors should be considered when determining the level of participation for a given decision.

■ Quality: Who possesses adequate knowledge of the situation in order to make a good decision?

If you don't know enough by yourself, others must be involved.

■ Urgency: How time sensitive is the situation? As the need for urgency increases the opportunity for participation decreases.

■ Acceptance: How important is acceptance to successfully implementing the decision? How likely is acceptance to be increased through participation?

■ Development: Is there an opportunity to develop employees through delegation or their involvement with the decision?

It serves a leader well to move as high on the participatory scale as the situation allows. The research shows that, even in a crisis, simply explaining your reasoning will convert employees from resistance to compliance and commitment.

Developing employees to confidently make decisions is essential to relieving leaders of daily duties so they can focus on more strategic activities. It's also vital to building a strong, committed team where "we" is the appropriate pronoun.

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