

COMMUNICATION IS THE KEY TO GREAT FRONTLINE LEADERSHIP

The ability to communicate appropriately is an essential component for effective leadership—especially frontline leadership. Yet 41% of people polled in a recent survey conducted by The Ken Blanchard Companies® identified poor communication as the number one mistake leaders make.

In this survey, more than 1,400 people from all levels within organizations were asked three questions:

- What are the top five things that leaders most often fail to do when working with others?
- What is the biggest mistake leaders make when working with others?
- What is the most critical skill a leader can possess when working with others?

Their responses provide a useful road map of what people are looking for from their leaders and the extent to which they are receiving it. Individuals and organizations looking to develop better frontline leadership skills can use this information to evaluate their own performance in these key areas.

What Are the Top Five Things That Leaders Most Often Fail to Do When Working with Others?

For this question survey participants were asked to choose from a list of options. Their top five choices in descending order were

- Failing to provide appropriate feedback (praise, redirection): 82%
- Failing to listen to or involve others in the process: 81%
- Failing to use a leadership style that is appropriate to the person, task, and situation (oversupervising or undersupervising): 76%
- Failing to set clear goals and objectives: 76%
- Failing to train and develop their people: 59%

What Does This Mean for Today's Frontline Leaders?

These five perceived failures on the part of leaders illustrate the need for frontline supervisors and managers to develop skills in three key areas: performance management skills, partnering skills, and interpersonal skills.

- **Performance management** skills enable the frontline leader to set clear performance expectations, reward and recognize progress toward goals, and provide negative performance feedback when necessary.
- **Partnering** skills help to accurately diagnose the individual competence and motivation levels of his or her direct reports, and then use the appropriate leadership style for the situation.
- **Interpersonal** skills include the ability to communicate effectively, listen actively, and maintain each employee's self-esteem while getting the job done.

Performance Management Skills

The first set of skills that all frontline leaders need to master is performance management skills—setting clear expectations, monitoring performance, and providing feedback. Most people would tell you that this is Management 101. So why is this basic task viewed as one of the biggest challenges for today's leaders? The answer is time. Managers today are not setting aside the amount of time they need in order to adequately manage the performance of the direct reports. This is leaving employees "fuzzy" on key objectives and how they are doing. The secret to helping an employee excel lies in the details: the best way to capture the details is to meet frequently and informally, while the specifics of a success or a disappointment are fresh in the memory.

Organizations and leaders looking to meet the day-to-day performance management needs of employees need to find ways to increase the amount of time managers and direct reports spend with each other. Great frontline leaders meet more frequently—and less formally—with the people they support. This makes the conversation vivid and the advice timely. Instead of saving performance discussions—and criticisms—for a formal annual review, the great frontline leader meets with each direct report bimonthly, weekly, or even daily to discuss performance, needs, and goals.

Partnering Skills

Once goals are clear and a schedule for meeting on a regular basis has been established, the next step for frontline leaders is to accurately diagnose the individual competence and motivation levels of his or her direct reports, and then use the appropriate leadership style for the situation.

Is the direct report an eager beginner with the task? An overwhelmed employee with moderate skills for the task? Or an experienced veteran who has routinely handled this task successfully in the past? Each of these employees requires a different management style.

When beginning a new task on which they have little, if any, prior knowledge or experience, most individuals should be led by a Directing style. They need to know what to expect and how to do the task at hand. As the employee develops expertise, his or her competence and commitment fluctuate. People at this stage need a Coaching style—high direction—to continue to build skills—as well as high support to address their low commitment.

As competence continues to improve, most individuals go through a self-doubt state where they question whether they can perform the task on their own. These individuals need a Supporting style—they need to be listened to and encouraged but do not need much direction, since they have demonstrated competence for doing the task.

Finally, at the last stage of development, employees demonstrate high levels of competence and commitment. The corresponding leadership style to use is Delegating—giving the employee increased autonomy because he or she has demonstrated both competence and commitment in performing the task.

Interpersonal Skills

Interpersonal skills are the third set of skills that hold it all together. If partnering and performance management skills are what today's frontline leader needs in order to manage effectively, interpersonal skills are how he or she goes about doing it. The leader must be able to communicate effectively, listen actively, and maintain each employee's self-esteem while getting the job done.

This skill set is a challenge for today's leaders. When we asked our survey respondents "What is the biggest mistake leaders make when working with others?" they told us it was inappropriate communication. Too often leaders either don't communicate; overcommunicate; communicate inappropriately through outbursts, anger, or blaming; or don't communicate clearly.

Not surprisingly, when we asked this same group, "What is the most critical skill a leader can possess when working with others?" they identified communication. The ability to listen, read body language, ask questions, provide feedback, and generate effective two-way communication builds trust and can also prevent performance problems down the road.

Frontline leaders looking to generate two-way communication with their direct reports may take these three steps as a starting point.

1. Gather information. For example, ask the direct report, "What are your thoughts on this? How do you feel about doing this?"
2. Check for understanding. The leader might say, "So this would be something new for you. Sounds like you're excited about this opportunity."
3. Ask for permission. Tactfully, say, "Since you haven't had any experience with this kind of thing, would it be helpful if ...?"

Improving Performance in Your Organization

Poor communication skills—not setting clear goals, not providing appropriate feedback, or not involving people in decisions that impact them—can have a devastating impact on performance and morale. In addition, leaders who use a leadership style that is inappropriate based on the task and development level of the person being managed can undermine morale, cause resentment, and destroy commitment.

Moreover, failing to listen to feedback, ignoring alternative viewpoints, or failing to seek clarity through active listening can undermine leadership effectiveness and trust.

A great frontline leader cannot be the command-and-control leader of the past. People are not interested in working for someone who just gives orders daily and conducts evaluations annually. Today's workers are looking for leaders who will coach them by listening actively and providing the direction or support needed to attain shared goals.

To improve performance in your organization, improve the quality of frontline leadership. That change will increase employee morale, satisfaction, and productivity. Providing your people with frontline leaders who possess great performance management, partnering, and interpersonal skills is one of the best ways to get things done in a way that is mutually satisfying to frontline workers, their supervisors, and the company as a whole.

1. Critical Leadership Skills: Key Traits That Can Make or Break Today's Leaders. Available online at www.kenblanchard.com/thoughtleadership/research_findings/