

8 Communication Habits to Make You a Better Leader

By DIANNA BOOHER MARCH 5, 2021



Editor's note: I'd like to welcome back Dianna Booher as she revives the "HR Communication Corner" column. Though she had bid the column farewell in January, Dianna will now be back with

Emotional instability can infect the workplace and lower productivity as surely as malfunctioning equipment. Often, the person causing the retention problem has moved from buddy to bully without intending ill will. It just “happens.”

That boss got promoted from supervisor to manager or from manager to senior executive without adequate leadership and communication skills for the job. Forming new habits will help.

Habit #1: Make Sure the Team Knows the Deliverables

In survey after survey, leaders report that their team understands organizational goals. Yet team members *themselves* say they do not. In a worldwide Gallup poll among 550 organizations and 2.2 million employees, only 50% of employees “strongly agreed” that they knew what was expected of them at work.

The more layers of the organization that stated goals need to travel through, the more chances that things get lost in translation. But the result remains the same: Disengagement and lowered productivity.

Habit #2: Dislodge Log-Jamming Directives

Lines like this stop workers in their tracks: “I’d like to blow this up and try to rebuild it from the ground up.” “Let’s just put everything on hold until I get a better understanding.” “Check back with me before you make any final commitment on that.” Such statements put a brake on productivity.

New leaders hope their work will be unique, pleasant, and profitable. That’s understandable. No leader intentionally creates a logjam.

All too often, however, new leaders or seasoned leaders taking over in a new position set their team up for disappointment rather than the intended positive reaction and productivity boost. No

Habit #3: Guide With Strategic Questions

Strategic thinkers use leading questions to advance a discussion and their case. With a well-planned series of questions, you can lead a group or an individual to rethink their position or decision without a direct challenge and without stating your position.

The beauty of this approach? Once voiced, people “buy” their own reasoning.

Habit #4: Become a Coach, Not a Critic

Ask any dieter which approach works best — coaching or critiquing. I guarantee they’ll select the coach every time. Ditto in the workplace. Coaches help team members identify their strengths. They communicate clear standards to measure success and provide resources. Most importantly, they provide a model, give clear feedback, offer encouragement, build confidence, provide stretch assignments, and celebrate wins.

Habit #5: Be Accountable for Bad Decisions

Nothing starts you as a leader on the road to recovering trust like admitting your lapse in judgment for a bad decision. It’s the *failure* to do so that infuriates others and compels them to keep pointing out the poor decision and the consequences.

To maintain accountability, you need to hear from the troops regularly to stay grounded. Ask difficult questions — questions that may generate troubling answers. And don’t punish people for telling you hard truths.

Also find someone or a small circle of trusted confidantes *who do not report to you or depend on you for a paycheck* — an internal or external coach, mentors, spouse, or friends. These people can help you stay focused on the tough challenges of leadership.

Habit #6: Respond Promptly in the Age of Twitter

On social media, the expectation time for response is zero to four hours. If you as the boss take longer to respond to text, emails, or requests for approvals, your team experiences a much bigger

As team leader, communicate clearly the standard response time: 4-hour response? 8-hour response? 24-hour response? Are there exceptions to this standard response? If so, what? Once you've communicated the standard, live by it.

Slow responses suggest many things — most of them negative.

Habit #7: Meet Like You Mean Business

You need an agenda -- not just the topics in your head. Shape those topics into laser-focused questions on the issues to narrow your discussion immediately. With a sharply focused agenda, all team members immediately know exactly the point of the discussion — the input needed, problem to be solved, or decision to be made. It's far easier to hit the target when everyone knows the intended outcome.

A strategically structured agenda is to a meeting what a foundation is to a skyscraper.

Habit #8: Be Brief

Begin with a summary. Tell your team what you want them to do, decide, consider, or learn as you elaborate further. Brevity gives focus. And with focus comes clarity.

Dianna Booher

Dianna Booher is the bestselling author of 49 books, published in 62 foreign-language editions. She helps organizations to communicate clearly and leaders to expand their influence by a strong executive presence

With Confidence. National Media such as Good Morning America, USA Today, The Wall Street

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