

Listening for Commitment



Sally, a “Coaching Forum” reader, recently complained about her boss’ behavior. Sally is the director of a service line in a large metropolitan hospital. She wrote to say that her boss, Linda, is wavering about a new program to which she had committed a few months earlier. The program is strategically important because it authorizes a new nursing role designed to improve the quality of patient outcomes and satisfaction. Based on Linda’s earlier commitment to the initiative, Sally interviewed a number of nurses who were enthusiastic about the new positions. Sally also generated excitement among her existing nursing staff.

Now, it appears that Linda, the COO, is backpedaling on her earlier promise. Sally does not understand why Linda changed her mind, and she is angry and disappointed.

Nora, another reader, writes about her frustration with “the lack of integrity” of one of her direct reports. Nora says she has repeatedly asked Henry, a nurse manager, to turn in performance evaluations for his nurses. Henry promises to turn in the evaluations, but on three separate occasions he has not done so.

What do these scenarios have in common? Both Linda and Henry are not following through on what they said they were going to do. Sally and Nora are understandably upset by behaviors they view as irresponsible and unacceptable. What should they do now? Should Sally act on her disappointment in her boss’ recent behavior? She says she wants to leave her position and work at the hospital across town.

Nora is clear that integrity is a very important value to her, and she is equally clear that she does not want a nurse manager who has “no integrity” reporting to her. Nora says she is ready to go to HR to start the process of firing Henry.

Here is the important point: our readers are ready to act based on the information they have and what they believe it means. *But both Nora and Sally are interpreting the actions of their colleagues in only one way.*

Are there any other ways to explain Linda and Henry’s behavior?

Obviously, something is stopping Henry and Linda from honoring their earlier commitments. Both are well regarded nurse leaders, so it is unlikely they have suddenly become wishy-washy and untrustworthy. Yet, it is interesting that neither Nora nor Sally has asked what is preventing their colleagues from moving forward with the commitments they made. Interestingly, neither has offered support by asking how she might help.

If Sally and Nora were to engage differently, they might be able to learn about Henry and Linda’s current concerns or aspirations. In other words, they might be able to hear about the pressing commitments that are *more important* to Linda and Henry *right now*.

In their seminal Harvard Business Review article “The Real Reason People Won’t Change,”¹ Kegan and Lahey describe the very real impact of multiple and sometimes competing commitments on human behavior. Health care leaders, for example, may be committed to improving the quality of patient care through all available means. Simultaneously, however, they are also committed to holding down costs. They know that if there is “no margin,” there is “no mission.”

Sometimes leaders may be dealing with more subtle competing commitments. For example, an otherwise exemplary employee may come late to work or miss it altogether because of challenges with a spouse or child. Although the hospital worker is still strongly committed to satisfactory job performance, he is attending to his personal needs and unable to negotiate a solution that will allow him to continue to perform well.

These examples illustrate the importance of learning more about what is causing otherwise good managers to perform in unexpected ways. As leaders, we must practice the art of discovery. This means having the ability to create conversation

that allows additional information to come forward.

Do we need to become employee assistance program officers, therapists, or detectives? No! Here are several proven strategies:

Suspend unhelpful assumptions and judgments. When we are able to set aside our own biases and premature conclusions, we can listen openly. When we authentically listen, we encourage dialogue that is both real and trusting. We are in a better position to elicit the truth.

Become curious. Would it be possible for Nora to temporarily suspend her belief that Henry lacks integrity? If she could do that, she could become genuinely curious about what is preventing Henry from turning in his performance evaluations.

Listen to what is not being said. Listen to more than words. What is the emotional tone of the individual with whom you are concerned? What do you read in her body language? What might be in the way for this person?

Manage internal barriers that interfere with listening and communicating. When we are listening, are we preparing what we are going to say next or are we genuinely hearing the other person? Are we listening generously and to understand? Are we summarizing what we are hearing so the other person knows she is being heard?

Nora and Sally decided to use these techniques in ways that were comfortable and natural for them. Sally chose to speak with her boss Linda about her apparent change of heart. Sally was careful to practice the conversation before the meeting so she would not become angry with Linda. This preparation served her well. She was able to have an honest dialogue in which Linda indicated that supporting this expensive program was no longer a position she could take with the CEO and executive committee of

the hospital. Without embarrassing Linda, Sally surmised that Linda was afraid to take what she perceived as a big risk.

With this new information Sally was able to offer Linda support. She proposed to accompany Linda to the next executive team meeting to provide data and explain the projected outcomes of the new program. In other words, Sally was willing to take on some of the risk that Linda was experiencing.

It does not matter whether we agree that Linda *should* feel this way or that Sally is willing to take on risk for her boss. What matters is our reader demonstrated a willingness to listen for her boss' deeper commitment. Because she heard Linda's aversion to taking this risk with the executive team, she was able to propose a solution and move the project forward.

Our other reader, Nora, temporarily suspended her judgment about Henry's lack of integrity. She engaged him using the tools above, and what she learned completely surprised her. Henry had been trained in the military, and he was embarrassed to let Nora know that he did not know how to conduct the performance evaluations.

We may have opinions about how and whether this could have happened, but we can learn from this reader's real experience. Although Henry was committed to excellence in nursing management, *in this case, he was more committed to saving face with his boss.* Nora could never have discovered this had she not created enough safety for their conversation.

Adapting and practicing these tools to suit your personal style can help you successfully deal with difficult problems. Please let me know how they work for you!

Reference

1. Kegan R, Lahey L. The real reason people won't change. Harvard Business Review. 2001; 79(11):85-92.

Catherine Robinson-Walker, MBA, MCC, is president of The Leadership Studio, a national firm that provides coaching and leader-as-coach training to nurses and their teams. She is an experienced health care leader, a master certified coach, and the 2006 "Friend of Nursing" for the Association of California Nurse Leaders. She can be reached at (510) 531-6391 or cathy@leadershipstudio.com.

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