Five Communication Skills Every Leader Must Have to Catch Liars in the Workplace

October 23, 2015

Information enables effective leaders to make good decisions. An engaging interplay between leader and workforce is vital to uncovering the best information of the highest quality. Effective questioning, marked by the ability to listen well and think clearly, is at the heart of that exchange.

Yet, most people lack the skill necessary to draw the information they need from the people who have it. We've all seen bad communicators, some of whom question people for a living. Thus, a license to practice law is no proof the lawyer can question the truth out of people. Similarly, a badge doesn't measure a detective's ability to draw information from witnesses and suspects. Worse, research shows that professionals in fields calling for nimble questioning often have unfounded confidence in their ability. Yet, the talent to artfully question others is indispensable to effective communication if high quality information is the goal.

Information gathering is easier if a business leader does things to encourage people to talk freely. The techniques described in this article work equally well when used during fact-finding in negotiations, investigating wrong-doing in the workplace, interviewing job candidates or simply speaking with someone who has information that the business professional wishes to learn. A person should exhibit these five characteristics when trying to get information from someone.

Gain Trust, Empathize And Lower The Witness's Anxiety

A business leader must understand the pressures a person is under while being asked questions. Is the employee being asked to reveal information that may hurt a friend or someone the he wants to protect? Is the employee afraid of the consequences of speaking freely? Empathy is important, but sometimes not enough. Calming an anxious witness, gently reinforcing the need to cooperate, is sometimes necessary for an effective inquiry.

For example, the United States government believes Abu Zubaydah was Osama Bin Laden's senior lieutenant and counter-intelligence officer. He managed training camps for al Qaeda and participated, in some form, in every one of its significant terrorist operations, including the 9/11 attacks. The United States caught him in Pakistan. He'd been shot multiple times during a raid on the house in which he was staying.

His wounds were so severe that CIA leaders thought he'd die. Yet, so important was Zubaydah that the government flew a medical specialist from the United States to treat him.

The FBI sent expert interrogator, Ali Soufan, to question Zubaydah. Soufan used a unique interrogation technique: he treated Zubaydah's wounds. "It wasn't easy, he couldn't drink, he had a fever," Soufan explained. I was holding ice to his lips." The care shown helped Soufan gain Zubaydah's confidence and lower his anxiety. These rapport-building techniques paved the way for Soufan to extract information crucial for American security. He learned, for instance, that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was the mastermind of the 9/11-attacks and that another terrorist, Jose Padilla, schemed to attack the United States with a dirty bomb, a device designed simply to kill. According to Soufan, the flow of information stopped once CIA agents started torturing Zubaydah.

Research and experience confirm that fear, resentment, and excessive anxiety at best can be counterproductive, at worst paralyzing and highly destructive to an inquiry. The more comfortable and less threatened people feel, the more likely they are to talk freely. In contrast, the more anxiety people feel the less likely they are to reply fully to questions, making their responses strategic, defensive and short.

Preserve An Open, Curious Mind

Curiosity must drive the inquiry. A successful leader must curb preconceptions. Early conclusions are often inaccurate. Leaders should search for the truth, not for evidence simply confirming suspicions. Listen to, understand and distrust first impressions. First impressions often spring from prejudgments not from facts. People decide how much they like each other within seconds of meeting. Facts, experiences and irrational conclusions merge to create the first impression. Also, stop using "intuition" as a basis for decision-making. It's simply another form of prejudice or bias. Harvard University professor of psychology Mahzarin Banaji is an expert on combating bias. She cautions, "Often your decision[s] [are] based on how similar or dissimilar [the other person is] to you."

Appear Professional And Self-Confident

A leader should appear fair, impartial, and interested in learning the truth. Do this by showing confidence in the inquiry. If a person who is asked questions thinks the leader is insecure, uninformed, angry, tendentious or time-pressed, then the leader will not control the exchange.

People new to questioning others can feel insecure. Even experienced leaders can feel intimidated when trying to draw information from others (such as during negotiations). Research reveals that these moments of insecurity can cause measurable physiological changes that alter a person's behavior. Feeling weak changes a person's physiology and makes them act weak. (Carney, Cuddy & Yap.) Witnesses can observe these changes, and this in turn can empower them to feel they control the exchange. Research also

confirms that people who lack self-confidence can reverse that feeling simply by changing their behavior. By pretending to be confident, a person can transform his or her body chemistry.

The secret? Mimic "power-behavior." Insecure people, both men and women, can create measurable changes to testosterone levels which can translate into feeling stronger, more powerful and more in control. (Carney, Cuddy & Yap.) Professor Amy Cuddy, from Harvard Business School, recommends those lacking self-confidence assume "power-poses" before entering circumstances in which they may feel insecure. A power pose is an arrogant posture, one in which the person "gets big" and "takes up space." The technique works equally for men and women. Professor Cuddy has created this shorthand to describe the process: "Our bodies change our minds. Our minds change our behavior. Our behavior changes our outcomes." Insecure or inexperienced investigators may wish to experiment with these techniques and to "fake it" until they rewire themselves.

Listen

One mistake eclipses all others in sabotaging the search for information: talking too much and listening too little. Most people confuse talking with power and control. Real power lies in consuming information. Negotiators, for example, will fail when ego, not information, drives the bargaining. The more a questioner knows, the more successful the outcome. People will tell you things if you let them. Many leaders don't give them the chance. Stop talking and listen.

Question With An Even-Temper

People who display anger often lose whatever advantage they could achieve through skillful questioning. Making things worse is the leader who thinly veils his efforts to confirm his preconceptions, or who struggles with unrealistic expectations of his ability to make people tell him things. In those situations, the leader's frustration degrades the interview, causing bitter, useless exchanges.

On June 11, 2007, a St. Paul Airport Police Department police officer arrested Idaho Senator Larry Craig after the senator had solicited the officer for sex in an airport restroom. Craig claimed his behavior was innocent. The officer, in contrast, found a lot of what Craig did to be unusual in a public restroom. The interrogation derails quickly as the officer grows frustrated with his inability to control Craig. I've edited the exchange to fit this space:

Craig: I sit down, um, our feet bumped. I believe they did, ah, because I reached down and scooted over and, urn, the next thing I knew, under the bathroom divider comes a card that says Police. Now, um, (sigh) that's about as far as I can take it, I don't know of anything else. . . .

[They argue.]

Officer: Okay. I don't want to get into a pissing match here. Have you been successful in these bathrooms here before?

Craig: I go to that bathroom regularly.

Officer: I mean for any type of other activities.

Craig: No. Absolutely not. I don't seek activity in bathrooms.

Officer: [After Craig deflects multiple questions] I don't disrespect you but I'm disrespected right now and I'm not trying to act like I have all kinds of power or anything, but you're sitting here lying to a police officer. And I, I'm not dumb. I just, I just, I guess, I guess I'm gonna say I'm just disappointed in you sir. I'm just really am. I expect this from the guy that we get out of the hood. I mean, people vote for you.

The senator is being difficult. Notice how he plays on the poorly asked question, "Have you been successful in these bathrooms here before?" The officer means sexually. Craig presumably realizes that, but sarcastically redefines a "successful" trip to a public toilet in a more regular way. He deflects the inquiry; he is not forthcoming. He mocks the officer, and the officer falls for it. He shouldn't. He should let the senator talk. The weirder and less plausible the story, the more the officer achieves his goal: a successful prosecution.

Information is at the core of power. Learn to invite it with patient, open-minded inquiry.

If you have questions, please contact your Lathrop Gage attorney or the attorney listed above.