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# What Leaders Expect Is What They Get!

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Millard MacAdam

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There is a saying: "What you get is what you expect and inspect with respect." Although not well known, research on the expectations of staff members by authority figures is solid and extensive. Proactive leaders would do well to understand and apply this knowledge to improve performance by staff members and more skillfully attain their organization's goals.

It isn't just how leaders view their people that influences staff behavior, it's the actions that result from seeing them that way. Fortunately, truly proactive leaders can learn to recognize their personal behaviors which block motivation and the expression of competence. They can learn to consciously use specific motivating and supportive interactions with even their lowest performers.

I have coached leaders in developing 15 management behaviors which support motivation and the expression of competence in staff members. These fifteen behaviors can be used as a diagnostic tool to discover if the opposite behaviors are being used in different settings.

The behaviors fall into three categories: (A) Response Opportunities; (B) Feedback; and (C) Personal Regard. Each category has five specific actions which influences staff member achievement and productivity.

## A. RESPONSE OPPORTUNITIES

1. Equitable Distribution of Response Opportunities - Leaders call on staff members perceived as high achievers during management team meetings more frequently than they call on those considered low achievers for several reasons: they do not wish to embarrass a staff member they suspect does not know the answer; leaders want the group to hear the correct or most thoughtful response; and a high quality performance by a staff member bolsters the leader's professional image.

Unfortunately, the snubbed person soon realizes that he is less apt to be called on, especially if he looks puzzled. He also knows why the leader calls on him less; because he's not one of the "smart" ones. He'll find other ways to get attention, or become the invisible man at all meetings. Either way, he is denied an equal opportunity to participate in and learn from the meeting.

The response opportunity may be extended or brief. A staff member needs enough time (more than five seconds) to think the question over before declining or being assisted. It should be a public response and should be recognized by the leader.

2. Individual Helping - Leaders know low achievers need individual help, but high achievers and average staff members are more aggressive in asking for and receiving help. In management team meetings, one or two staff members are usually consistently ignored, despite signals for

help.

Individual help is usually a private interaction between a staff member and the leader. Perfunctory help could even be non-verbal. For example, a leader sometimes points to the error, and smiles or nods when the staff member makes the correction.

Merely commenting on a staff member's work does not necessarily constitute help. If the leader looks at a staff member's work and says, "That's good," a positive result is unlikely because the staff member is not being told how he improved his work. There is a high payoff for giving individual assistance to staff members, whether or not it is solicited.

3. Latency - The time between asking a question and terminating the response opportunity is called "latency". Leaders usually allow high achievers more time to answer a question than low achievers. If the high achiever hesitates, the leader waits for him to think through an answer because the leader feels confident the response will be worthwhile. When the low achiever hesitates, the leader anticipates no answer or an inadequate response. The leader may not wish to embarrass the staff member nor waste time, so the response opportunity is shut off and the question goes to another staff member.

Latency occurs more frequently when the leader asks questions which require interpretation, reorganizing facts, or formulating of an opinion.

4. Delving, Rephrasing, Giving Clues - When low achievers are questioned, they are frequently given the easiest questions and are "let off the hook" if they look puzzled or bewildered. Leaders are less apt to provide clues or to delve for answers with low achievers. Consequently, the leader's questioning approach may be less encouraging and helpful to low achievers than to high achievers. Implicit in this skill is a leader's recognition of the staff member's best style or mode of functioning.

Helpful leaders could provide additional information verbally or non-verbally to help staff members respond to a question. If the answer is incomplete, incorrect, or there is no response, consider rephrasing the question, give a clue, provide additional information, explain the question, or ask a different but related question. Repeating the original question is not delving. The leader's purpose is to be sure that staff members have what help is needed to respond, not to wring a response from them.

Leader's questions have been categorized in many ways. Perhaps the best known classification is the "Taxonomy of Educational Objectives" developed by Benjamin Bloom. Here is an outline of Bloom's taxonomy:

#### KNOWLEDGE

- Knowledge of Specifics
- Knowledge of Ways and Means of Dealing with Specifics
- Knowledge of the Universals and Abstractions in a Field

## INTELLECTUAL ABILITIES AND SKILLS

- Comprehension
- Application
- Analysis
- Synthesis
- Evaluation

Questions which fall under the knowledge realm are those which ask staff members to remember information. Questions under intellectual abilities and skills ask the staff member to do something with information. The staff member may be asked to express an opinion about the information, to evaluate it, to discover connections between several bits of information, to suggest how or why, or to organize information.

Recall questions are not necessarily easy. The material to be recalled may be complex or abstruse. Conversely, staff members can deal with higher level questions if the content is rephrased or simplified.

By asking low achiever staff members the easy questions, we neglect the development of their intellectual abilities. The effective leader distributes questions equally among staff members of all ability.

For most higher level questions, the leader should not have a pre-conceived "right" answer. Openness to different answers is a high-level management skill. While conducting a workshop, one leader asked staff members to express opinions about a group member's suggestion. Various opinions were offered and the leader reacted with a tentative "Um hum." Finally one staff member's opinion brought this response from the leader, "Yes! Now that's close to what I was thinking." It was clear that a "right" answer was wanted, and was what the staff members had been groping to provide, rather than trying to formulate their own opinions.

Proactive leaders ask questions which require more than remembering the answer from reading, previous direction, or another source. Positive outcomes flow from questions which ask for the following:

- Give an opinion
- Assess facts
- Evaluate information
- Discover connections between facts
- Apply previously-learned information to a new situation
- Hypothesize why or how something occurred

## B. FEEDBACK CATEGORY

1. Affirmation or Correction - After responding to the leader's questions and directions or performing in some way, a staff member usually wants to know what the leader thinks of his performance. After observing leaders interact with staff members perceived as high achievers

and staff members perceived as low achievers, I find that leaders are less apt to react to the low staff member's response. Leaders responded to the highs about 97 percent of the time. The lows received feedback on about 80 percent of their responses.

Proactive leaders tell staff members that their response or work is or is not acceptable and why, and specifically what would make it acceptable.

A positive result occurs if the feedback tells the staff member how his answer is wrong or even how his performance is inadequate and can be improved. Sometimes the leader may involve others in providing affirmation or correction. Feedback may be positive even though cursory or perfunctory: "Yes," "Um hum," "Good," "OK," "Wrong," "No," or repeating the answer while non-verbally communicating approval or disapproval.

2. Praise of Performance - Most leaders make frequent use of praise to encourage and to reinforce desired performance. The staff members most in need of encouragement and reinforcement would seem to be low achievers. Yet high achievers receive the most management praise. This could be because high achievers are given more opportunities to perform. Also, when lows give a right answer, they are less apt to be praised than highs giving a right answer.

Conversely, the low achieving staff member is more apt to be criticized by his leader. Evidence suggests that simply informing a staff member with corrective feedback how his answer or performance is incorrect results in performance gains. Criticism appears to block staff member achievement.

Praise rather than punishment is a great concept, but should not have staff members thinking they are doing satisfactory work when they aren't. A positive result occurs when the leader praises a staff member's answer to a question, report or contribution to a discussion. Phony praise is easily detected. Watch for opportunities to praise sincerely. Many people respond more to praise given in private.

In working with company owners and their leadership teams, I've found they rarely vary their praise words. When "good" is used repeatedly, it loses its impact. Here are some other ways of saying "good for you."

- This kind of work pleases me very much.
- I appreciate your help.
- That's top quality work.
- It looks like you put a lot of work into it.

Praise goes beyond acceptance to express pleasure or enthusiasm. A leader might say "right" or "good" in a toneless way with little facial expression to accept or affirm the behavior. Or, the leader might say "right!" or "good!" in a tone of voice and with a facial expression which says, "I am really pleased. You did a fine job."

3. Listening - Staff members spend much of their time listening. In the average meeting someone is talking two-thirds of the time. Two-thirds of that time, the person talking is the leader. And two-thirds of the time the leader talks, he is using direct influence; that is, lecturing, giving directions, or criticizing.

An overwhelming characteristic of meetings is the amount of time people spent waiting. Staff members wait for their turn to interact with the leader or to be called upon in a discussion. When the awaited turn arrives, the staff member may be disappointed to learn that the leader is not listening to them.

Maintaining eye contact with staff members tells them their response was heard. Facial expressions indicate patience and interest. A positive result occurs if it is evident that the leader listened, even to a staff member's response as brief as one word.

4. Reasons for Praise - Often just a word of praise is sufficient, and explaining would be ridiculous. But a staff member who completes a task deserves to know why it is good or poor. Leaders usually provide process feedback if the process used in producing the desired results by the staff member is erroneous or inappropriate. They are less likely to provide process feedback when praising. Telling the why behind praise has a much stronger impact than praise unrelated to criterion. Rather than making a general comment like "Terrific" or "Great", say, "I like the way you structured that report...it shows your knowledge of communication."

Positive results also flow if the leader delegates extended praise to another. For example, ask Mary what she likes about Phil's report.

5. Accepting Feelings - The ability to use the feeling tone of a staff member constructively, to react to feelings and clarify them, is a rare skill. Leaders with this ability can often mobilize positive feelings and motivation and successfully control negative feelings that might otherwise get out of hand. Thomas Gordon's "Leader Effectiveness Training" details this method in dealing with boss-staff member conflicts.

If staff members are inhibited about expressing feelings, and if leaders do not handle their own feelings, how are staff members to learn to cope with feelings honestly? Leaders can help staff members understand that negative emotions are normal by discussing or by role playing social situations about which staff members may have fears or self-doubts.

Some evidence exists that staff members are productive when leaders accept feelings. Those who experience "empathetic understanding" tend to produce more than staff members of leaders who infrequently manifest this quality. Empathetic understanding can be learned by leaders who desire a healthier work climate and increased productivity.

Leaders who have been conditioned to avoid feelings find that accepting feelings is the most difficult of behaviors. But the payoff is management that is more relevant, and an enterprise that is more humanistic by dealing with the whole person, feelings and all.

Staff members sometimes express anger. Minor tiffs can accelerate into larger problems if the leader rebukes those involved. The solution-oriented leader accepts the feelings of both sides and provides an avenue for solving the problem. The leader may demonstrate acceptance of feelings by putting an arm around the shoulders of a staff member or nod his head with a sympathetic look.

### C. PERSONAL REGARD

1. Proximity - Leaders spend more time working with staff members perceived as high achievers. Staff members perceived to be low achievers tend to be clustered in a rear corner of the room, in back seats, or to one side of the room. Often low achievers seem to be placed, or themselves choose to be at the farthest point possible from the leader.

Sometimes a staff member may have good reasons to choose to withdraw from the group, or a leader may reasonably wish to isolate a staff member for a time. However, if the same staff members are either denied or continually reject proximity to the leader, they benefit less from being in the group.

If staff members are working individually or in clusters and the leader is moving about the room, a positive result occurs each time the leader goes to a staff member and verbally or non-verbally interacts with him. Trained leaders come within arm's reach of every staff member equally over a period of time, whether or not the staff member is aware of her/his presence.

If a staff member isolates himself from the group, a positive result occurs if the leader goes to the staff member. Merely passing by does not produce a positive result unless the leader speaks or touches the staff member in passing.

2. Courtesy - One often observes the sheer rudeness with which many leaders routinely speak to staff members. They don't say "please" or "thank you", they simply give orders without explanation. Yet, if we do not respect others, how can we expect them to respect us? Strangely enough, these leaders insist that staff members behave respectfully toward them. I have found myself and observed others experiencing a metamorphosis from a rigid disciplinarian to a leader who puts respect on an equal balance with discipline. I have stopped being concerned over how staff members express their respect for me and have set my mind and my heart to the task of learning how I can express my respect for them.

3. Personal Interests/Compliments - Taking time to listen to a staff member who wishes to share a personal experience is often difficult. But repeatedly refusing to listen to certain staff members tells those people that their lives are unimportant.

Some leaders find that staff members may wish to contribute their own experiences. Given these opportunities they become more open. Certainly a leader should not force a staff member to share his away-from-work life. My concern is more with the response of the leader to staff members who volunteer their experiences.

There should be a distinction between praise of performance and compliments of a personal nature. Praise is given when the staff member's activities are directly related to work objectives; personal compliments are given for behaviors which are extraneous to work. Staff members need both types of reinforcement. Leaders should try to use these techniques in an equitable manner.

Accomplished leaders ask questions or make statements relating to the staff member's personal interests or experiences. Positive results occur when a leader offers a compliment for something extraneous to the work task, e.g., "How nice you look today" or "I saw your article in the trade journal. You were terrific" or "Congratulations on being elected president of your professional organization."

4. Touching - Some leaders are reluctant to touch or to be touched by staff members. This suggests a physical revulsion or a fear of the possible consequences of physical contact. We have been taught not to touch. An angry, hostile person often makes it very evident that he is literally untouchable. But does it seem likely that you can reach him without being able to touch?

Leaders touch high achievers more frequently than low achievers. Why do we easily touch some staff members, but hesitate with others? Some staff members seem to resent being touched by the leader and may jerk away or even say, "Don't touch me." Is it because of previous experiences with others? Is the staff member saying, "I don't want any more of a relationship with you than having to be under your direction forces on me?"

A leader may well be cautious in touching a staff member of the opposite sex. However, we are concerned with touching behavior which discriminates between high and low achievers of the same sex. Touching is a form of communication. Note that a hand on the arm, on the shoulder, and around the shoulders often communicates a slightly different feeling in each situation. What is perceived as friendly and appropriate touch by a staff member is quite effective.

5. Desisting - Desist is used to designate a leader's doing something to stop a misbehavior. Possibly somewhere there is a perfectly managed environment in which desists are never needed. However, most leaders find desisting necessary.

Desisting should not be eliminated, although infrequent desisting usually reflects effective management. The nature of the leader's desisting behavior and to who desists are directed are the important factors. Some staff members experience almost exclusively desist interactions with their leaders. Low achieving staff members receive a greater proportion of conflictive and dominating leader contacts, while high achieving staff members received more supportive contacts. Sometimes desists seem to be directed toward particular staff members although they are not alone in misbehaving.

The manner of desisting varies with the staff member. When well-behaved, neatly-dressed Betty helps herself to one of the reports which the leader had said would be distributed later, the leader says, "Betty, you must not have heard me say that those reports would be passed

out later. Will you please put the report back?" But if Bill, whose frequent digressions frustrate the leader, does the same thing, we hear, "Bill, you heard me tell the group that we would pass those reports out later! Why don't you ever listen? Put the report back now!"

Hostile, threatening desists are linked to lack of productivity, whereas non-threatening desists are tied to achievement. Hostile desists are probably not even effective in controlling behavior. Punishment, along with negative emotion, is aggressive and will make the leader a target for increased aggression from others.

Desists should not reveal that you expect appropriate behavior from some staff members, misbehavior from others. The best desist is calm and courteous. If the misbehavior results in a situation that angers the leader, that anger can be expressed, but the anger should be directed toward the situation. "It makes me furious to see material wasted." "I am angry because you came so close to injuring each other." The leader may describe what he feels and clarify his expectations, but he avoids venting hostility or attacking the person's character.

## IN SUMMARY

Proactive leaders who are intent on helping all staff members achieve their personal best spend the time necessary to get trained or coached in mastering these skills. They consistently examine their perceptions of each of their staff members. They concentrate on using appropriate behaviors with all staff members. The result is greater productivity, loyalty and high regard for themselves and the organization.

If you need help in mastering and implementing any of the skills and tactics mentioned, I'm here for you! Please visit the Call-A-Coach section of my web site for more information.

## About the author:

Dr. Mac shares with business owners the practical knowledge and insights he gained as a small company CEO. He founded Sycamore Ranch, Inc. when 27 and as CEO led his partners and a staff of 100 for 16 years in developing and operating the 50 acre recreational facility. Years later, he integrated what he learned from his Doctoral program at USC with his practical business experiences and began consulting. For four decades Mac's coached business owners in mastering and applying "how to" leadership and managerial skills for: Hiring and retaining

only the top ten percent producers; Optimally deploying and supervising staff to maximize their personal motivation; Developing high integrity leadership teams; Facilitating mutual performance accountability and peer coaching processes; and, Integrating his Intentional Business Integrity Process into their company operations. Mac has served leaders in manufacturing and high tech companies; accounting, banking and insurance enterprises; medical and health care organizations; service and retail oriented businesses; as well as educational, governmental and non profit organizations. Q&A ProActive Leadership 888-648-5552 or MacAdam@PALConsulting

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