

# Speaking to Direct Reports Requires Forethought

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So often when leaders speak downwardly to their direct reports, they don't think about it. They just do it without much thought. To the person on the other side of the table or on the other side of the globe, the meeting may mean a lot. Speaking to one's direct reports should not be handled in a cavalier manner. When executives shoot from the hip, they may seem attacking and downright insensitive. The behaviors modeled are anything but exemplary. Here are some tips:

- **Turn off the phone.** Can you imagine how it feels when direct reports see you looking at your phone? Additionally, partially listening and partially reviewing your phone prevents you from quickly digesting even the most organized information. It delays decisions.
- **Relax your team.** Make small talk. Spend a few minutes learning more about the person or people in front of you. Ask about weekends, travel or children. Most importantly, disclose information about yourself. People work harder for those they know and like.
- **Think about the people (person) you are addressing.** What's the best way to share information? Do they need details, the grand scheme, etc.? Keep in mind the way they process information as you talk to them.
- **Review the pre-reads or executive summaries if you have asked for a project update.** It's always a good idea to review the next day's schedule the night before. Often, meeting participants send pre-reads or summaries that will better prepare you for the upcoming meeting. Don't skip reading them. You will feel more educated and be less interruptive.
- **Show how you feel. Smile.** Laugh if appropriate. Be enthusiastic about your message or your direct report's. Your body language says a lot. Direct reports will watch your facial expression, in particular, to see how they should

react. It may also make them adjust their own explanations. The bottom line is a face devoid of expression is deadly; so is one that shows you are annoyed.

- **Avoid interrupting.** Don't talk over. It is very difficult for people who are speaking to their boss to be interrupted. It derails them, and they frequently lose their point. Talking over them suggests that your point is more important than theirs.
- **Ask questions respectfully.** Of course, you will have questions, but ask them in a courteous manner. Direct reports get very upset by statements such as, "Why are you telling me this now." OR "How did you let this get away from you." Direct reports want to do a stellar job. Attack the plan if you must, but not the person. Negative, critical comments will be remembered long after the fact.
- **Focus on fixing, not blaming.** While it can feel like your direct report has dropped a dead fish on your desktop, don't allow emotions to cloud your judgment. Your direct report may not see the forest through the trees. Without being prescriptive, guide them. Help them to find a solution that may not seem apparent.
- **Allow time for questions.** Just like you have questions, your team will have questions. Do not rush when answering. Validate their point of view and consider why the person might be asking.
- **Be clear.** Often there are next steps or deadlines. Be clear on what you are expecting. Leave nothing to chance. One of the biggest complaints direct reports have is that they aren't sure what to do next.

Speaking to one's direct reports requires care. As busy as you are, demonstrate that you think time spent with your team is important and not something to be rushed.

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***Question:** Think about your team. What is something you need to change when speaking to them? We're interested in your reaction to this article. Click here – to comment on this article, share your concerns or ask questions. Judy will respond to all questions.*

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