

FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE

By Marilyn Thiet

Last week I had a coaching conversation with a manager that was a repeat of a conversation I've had numerous times with other leaders. The person was talking about the fact that some members of his team were not performing to his expectations. Work was not getting done in the way he wanted it done and he was quite frustrated. When I asked if his team member knows what is expected of him, I received the answer I get the majority of the time, "Of course they do". When I follow up by asking how they can be sure, how to do they know that the person knows exactly what is expected of them, the "dancing" begins. This person's answer mimicked what I've heard from countless others, something to the effect of "Well he should know, he's been in the job a long time". The other typical response I get is "I would assume so, I've told him repeatedly".

There are numerous reasons that someone does not perform to expectations. The usual response from most managers is to doubt the person's abilities or attitude. But I am much more likely to hold up the mirror for the leader to evaluate the communication and direction given to their team members. In many cases the communication is at one extreme or another. Either communication hasn't taken place at all or it has been delivered in a manner in which it is difficult to understand. The only true way we know if our communication is being received and understood is to ask, not assume. This holds true whether we are communicating a specific work task to be accomplished or communicating the strategic direction of the company.

Are those who work for you able to tell you the mission of your organization and the strategy of how you will get there? If not, their likelihood of connecting work tasks to the strategy and performing them in the expected manner is low. Take time this week to ask more than tell. Ask your team what is their understanding of your organizational strategy, and how their role and work plays into the successful execution of that strategy. Ask what their expectations are of themselves, what are they trying to achieve. Ask about specific work assignments, what are their ideas around the best way to tackle them and the expected results. If the answers are not quite what you wanted to hear, then ask yourself what role you played in this misinterpretation and what role you are playing in your team's performance.

"What we got here is failure to communicate" is the famous line from the 1967 movie Cool Hand Luke. Make sure this line is not the mantra for you and your team.