

Are You an Intimidating Manager? Think Again.

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ARE YOU AN INTIMIDATING MANAGER? THINK AGAIN.

Written by Larry Johnson

I just read a *Harvard Business Review* article called “Managers, You’re More Intimidating Than You Think” by Megan Reitz and John Higgins. They talk about the fact that as managers, we can sometimes come across to our subordinates as more intimidating than we think, even if we’re sure we’re the nicest people in the world.

Much of this perception is due to our position. After all, when you are the manager, you have the power, if need be, to cause pain for anyone who reports to you – and everybody knows that. So, right off the bat, the relationship is uneven and therefore a little intimidating. The problem is that when people perceive you as intimidating, they don’t tell you what you need to know and that can lead to your being a naked Emperor like the one in that famous fairy tale that we all read as kids, “The Emperor’s New Clothes.”

An Intimidating Manager May Not Mean To Be Intimidating

I’m reminded of the CEO of a company that had hired me to present a series of management development workshops. At an executive meeting, where I was to discuss what I would cover in the program, I suggested that it would be a good thing for the

CEO to attend the sessions to show his support. With that, he went ballistic, stating in a loud and angry sounding voice, "I don't need to come to this kind of basic training! I have an MBA from Harvard for God sakes." I looked around the room and everyone else was looking at their shoelaces.

Later on, the person who had set up the program came to me and said, "Look, George is in a bad mood today. I'll talk to him when he calms down and we'll get this straightened out." And, indeed he did talk to George and George ended up agreeing to kick off all the meetings.

It occurred to me that maybe George's style might intimidate people and discourage them from bringing him information he needed, thus putting him at risk for being a naked Emperor.

The next time I met with George I asked him, "Do you suppose it's possible that people are afraid to tell you things you need to know if they think it will upset you?" He replied, "No way. They know my bark is worse than my bite. No one's afraid to be honest with me."

I asked if it was ok with him if I checked that out, and he agreed.

In the next two months that the program ran, I met many of the participants and asked them, among other questions, "Do you find anybody in the executive suite so intimidating that you would be afraid to be honest with him or her?" To a person, every one brought up George's name. It seems that George's perception of himself was a little different than everybody else's.

The Lesson

The lesson here is that we all probably should look at ourselves as managers and say, "Gee, do the people who work for me find me too intimidating to be honest with?"

One way to do that is just ask those who report directly to you if they find you intimidating.

Another question might be, "If I did or said something stupid would you tell me?" Or, "When you don't agree with me, are you comfortable telling me so and why?" Just the fact that you are asking sends a message that it is okay for them to disagree with you.

Of course, how you respond will make a huge difference. If you say, "Did you agree with that decision I made?" And the person you're asking says, "Well, I think you should have done this or that instead", and you immediately argue with her, you instantly send a message that says, "I may have said it was okay to disagree with me but unless you agree with me, I will punish you!" So, you need to be careful not to react too quickly when somebody does disagree with you or states a different opinion or gives you feedback you don't want to hear – even if they are wrong and what they say needs correcting.

I call it "Earn Yourself a Hearing." It means hearing them out first and letting them know that you heard and respected what they said. It's a four-step process.

1. Engage.

Give them your full attention, don't be on your cellphone, don't be looking at your computer screen. Don't look elsewhere. Give them full eye contact, and put an expression on your face that conveys you really want to hear what they have to say.

2. Paraphrase.

Rephrase what they just told you. So, for example, if he says, "I didn't really agree with your decision on insurance coverage for our employees." You might paraphrase it by saying, "Okay, so you didn't like my decision. What are your thoughts?" That's paraphrasing. You just rephrase what they said and then combine it with a question to clarify.

3. Empathize.

Empathy is the ability to understand how another person feels. Empathizing is the act of paraphrasing that feeling. To empathize the example above, you might say, "It sounds like you feel strongly that there's a better solution to this insurance question."

4. Offer your point of view.

Research has shown that if you do steps 1, 2, and 3 first, the person you are having the discussion with is significantly more likely to be willing to hear your point of view. It reinforces the idea that you really did want to hear their opinion, even if you don't agree with it. This also reduces the chances they will feel intimidated by you and avoid sharing another opinion with you that they don't think you want to hear.

This way, you reduce the odds that you inadvertently intimidate and discourage people from bringing you valuable information you need to know. And just maybe, keep you from being a Naked Emperor.

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