

Why the Way Managers and Leaders Talk to Employees is a Matter for Concern

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We have a strong, innate social need to be connected to and accepted by others. It is as strong as our instinct for physical survival and is in fact part of our drive to survive through cooperating with others. We experience the pain of social loss (rejection, exclusion, humiliation, bullying, disrespect) in the same ways and in the same places in our brain as we do physical pain. The same chemicals are released into our brains in both cases but we are able to forget the feelings associated with physical injury more quickly than loss of relationship or group connection. This suggests how critical the social side of our lives was and still is to our survival.

Researchers suggest the way we describe social loss (“She broke my heart,” “I was crushed,” “It was like a kick in the head,” “It was a blow to my pride,” “He cut me deeply.”) is an indication of overlap between how our brains experience the emotional aspects of physical and social injury. Functional MRI images show two regions of our brains are activated when we are physically hurt, one for the bodily sensations and the other for the feelings that accompany the injury. Images of people experiencing simulated rejection or memories of close personal loss show that same feeling region is activated by social pain also.

Our response to social threats (including loss of status or acceptance) is the primitive option of fight or flight. Since we can do neither at work without losing our jobs the typical third option is to freeze followed by actions ranging from withdrawal to trying to undermine the source of the pain covertly. At work the threats to our social well-being usually come in the form of what is said, how it is said and how it affects our standing in the group.

Using functional MRIs researchers have identified several social situations in which our neural network that responds to threats is activated. They include conditions and actions by others that lessen our status or appearance of competence, make us uncertain because we lack information or clarity as to what is expected of us, seem to us unfair or make us feel we are not accepted by groups that are important to us or that we are losing key relationships. We react defensively to threats or “injuries” in these areas in both our personal lives and in the social systems where we work with equal emotion.

At the most basic level the forms of expressions a manager or leader uses in talking to a employee have profound social implication for the employee’s relationship with the manager, the work group and the employee’s work. Here are three common examples. First, commands, demands, public feedback or rebukes all provoke a threat response in our brains even if we are not able to push back outwardly. There is evidence that indicates that

commands or demands have the effect of lessening our sense of responsibility for what we do have to do in response.

A closed or leading question frequently feels much the same as a command. Coming from a manager or leader it essentially communicates this is something I want you to agree to or accept. It is experienced as being talked down to which puts the receiver in a lesser position and lessens his or her ownership of the action or ideas he/she has to accept. Both direct commands or feedback and questions used as implied commands are threatening to our social standing and competence and produce pain and withdrawal to some degree.

The experience of being asked an open-ended question is, however, very different after we get over the initial shock. The shock is because the experience is both novel - it doesn't happen very often - and challenging - because it means we have to think. The social implications are generally positive if a bit stressful especially after we learn we are actually going to be listened to. The implications are that we are seen as capable of thinking and having valuable information and ideas (status) and we are on a par with the questioner (acceptance). There is indication that open questions or challenges in fact activate the reward system in our brain. These positive effects are, however, negated if the leader's response implies there is a "right" answer we are expected to have.

There is another side to our social lives at work and away from it. Experiences in the same areas where we can be threatened (status, competence, predictability, belonging and being treated fairly) can also bring us pleasure. The neural reward network in our brains releases hormones that make us feel good when we are asked to join a group or collaborate with others, given meaningful responsibilities and clear expectations, recognized for our competence or contribution, accepted or shown approval and treated equally and fairly. These feelings reinforce our drive for positive social relationships and increase our sense of connection to and responsibility for others and the groups in our personal lives. They also increase our commitment to shared goals and our engagement in efforts for the common good at work.

What is important about this research for managers and leaders? It would seem to indicate that there is risk for leaders who do not focus the social side of their roles (how they talk to, treat and relate to employees) in the same way they do the results-oriented side. Here is the summary of research that reinforces that possibility. 60,000 employees asked to identify characteristics of "great leader." 14% identified being strong on results-focus as a "great leader" behavior; 12% identified social skills as a characteristic. However, 72% saw being strong on both behaviors as characteristic of "great leaders." Sadly but maybe not surprising, less 1% rated their leaders as high on both of the characteristics