

What Is Wrong with Telling People What to Do?

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What do managers routinely do that frustrate their employees? And parents do that frustrate their children? And spouses do that frustrate each other?

One of the most common frustrations people experience is being told what to do. Kids get really tired of their parents telling them what to do. Hence, kids leave their stuff all over the house despite being told hundreds of times to pick it up. Employees get equally tired of being micromanaged and told how to do their jobs. Hence, employee engagement scores are very low in organizations with managers who don't empower their people. Friends and family members also get little pleasure out of being told what to do and how to do it. Even though telling can be done quickly and with the best intentions, it is rarely appreciated by the receiver.

If you are in a position of influence, whether at home or work, and want someone to do something, don't tell them what to do. It is the least effective way to impart knowledge and sustain reliable performance. Reserve telling for simple tasks or crisis situations only.

There are serious negative consequences to telling people what to do:

1. There is no guarantee the person you are telling is listening. While you are lecturing your teenager, for example, they are probably thinking about what they are going to do with their friends as soon as you're done.
2. People have no ownership in what you tell them to do. If what you tell them works, they don't feel any credit because it was your idea. If it fails, they don't care. It was your stupid idea to begin with.
3. When you tell someone what to do you don't leverage their knowledge. They don't contribute anything to the situation. You miss out on their experience, creativity, and opinions. You miss out on the use of their brain and the process of building upon each other's ideas.
4. People who are not involved in deciding something are not bought into implementing it. If they don't feel consulted or haven't provided input, they won't likely appreciate why your plan is the best.
5. When you tell people what to do they don't feel valued. They think you didn't care enough about their opinion to ask for it so they don't feel very important. In return, they probably won't give you their best effort.
6. People who are told what to do miss out on the opportunity to learn. Since you never engaged their brain, they learned little about what you want done. They don't know how you arrived at your decision. They don't learn the principles or logic you used. They don't know the alternatives that were considered or why other options were rejected.
7. Top performers won't tolerate it. Talented, smart, and self-starting employees won't stick around long when they aren't empowered to make decisions. They feel repressed, slowed down, and underappreciated when relegated to merely doing what they are told.

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People who routinely tell others what to do are like the proverbial “command and control” managers who bark orders at their subordinates as if they are mindless machines of execution. The receivers of these commands then turn into unintelligent and unmotivated robots. They turn their brains off and wait for instruction. Ironically, these commanding managers then complain that their employees never take initiative and never seem to give their best effort. These managers grumble that they are constantly having to tell their people what to do and how to do it.

The better way to achieve something through others is to engage them in a dialog. Involve them, gain their buy-in, leverage their good ideas, and reach agreement with them on what they will do so they take ownership and pride in doing it.

Here are a few principles to consider when wanting others to do something:

- Start by explaining the “why”. Gain people’s buy-in for the big picture. State the overall problem you are trying to solve or the opportunity you are hoping to leverage. Paint a vision of a better future. Bring it to life by giving examples and stories that highlight the impact of the better future. If a sense of urgency is needed, explain the “why now” in addition to the “why”.
- Create a dialog about the “why”. Uncover and discuss any objections about your desired future and expected timing. Don’t assume that people have the same vision or values that you do. Reach agreement on the problem you want solved or the opportunity you hope to leverage.
- Once you agree on the problem to solve, ask for people’s ideas on how to solve it. Give them a chance to come up with solutions before you bias them toward yours. Brainstorm alternatives. A new idea or a variation of your idea might end up being a better one than you had.
- After considering alternatives, agree on the “what” to be done. Confirm in clear terms what was agreed upon and will be implemented. Include as much of their idea as possible. A less than perfect idea that is fully bought into by the implementer is often better than a perfect idea not bought into by the implementer.
- Discuss “how” the solution will be implemented. Give people the opportunity to use their strengths and preferences. Get into the details of the implementation only to the extent you have confidence that it will achieve your desired outcomes.
- Agree on how you will follow up and track progress. It may be that you only need to know when something is completed. Or, to the opposite extreme, you may need an hourly progress report. Discuss and agree on the level of your involvement in the implementation and accountability that is required.

Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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