
Scoping It Out

Every Contact Counts!

“The greatest cure for fear is action.”

I read that quote on a refrigerator magnet years ago and it stuck with me. Change can be scary, but prolonged fear will not accomplish anything. The changes and issues in health care delivery can be seen as massive and impenetrable. As health care professionals, we face staffing shortages, long hours, new demands, a changing new work force, the need for education, a lack of resources, and laws, regulations, and policies. Choose any one: All of these can create fear.

What is *the* most important thing you can do in the workplace today to alleviate fear? Consider creating great relationships. Understand that every contact counts. Get off—and stay off—the “gossip-go-round.” Talk *to* people, not *about* them. Keep in mind that time spent improving ourselves cuts down on time spent disapproving of others. It keeps our focus where it needs to be.

Here’s what you can do immediately: Start taking personal responsibility for how you respond to the events of the day. You make choices all day long: whether to speak up; what to say; whom to speak to. Communication is the lifeblood of good relationships at work. When we feel lost or fearful, it is important to talk to someone and gain clarity.

But gaining clarity requires you to take some risk. Asking questions to gain clarity could make an employee look like the only one who doesn’t know what’s going on. If that’s your fear, consider this: What is more important—clarity and ownership of something well done? Or not looking foolish? You decide. Then take responsibility for your decision. Is it better to speak up and ask clarifying questions or make gigantic assumptions about what is expected? You decide. Then be accountable for your decision.

As a manager, you have expectations of your employees and they have expectations of you. When expectations are unclear or change without notice, conflict ensues. We expect the person in charge to be clear with us. If he or she is not, we can become afraid of or angry with that person. We might blame the boss for our not being able to do our jobs.

On the other hand, the boss might have a contrary expectation. He or she might expect us to ask questions if we don’t understand something.

Why not stop making assumptions? If you are the boss, tell your employees to ask you questions if they need clarification. If you are not in charge, tell whoever is that you need him or her to be more clear.

If you don’t, people will talk *about* each other rather than to each other. And nothing spreads fear quicker than gossip.

If you want to step out of fear and into better working relationships, clarify your expectations of other people at work. Expectations are unique to each group and each individual. People can’t read your mind; you have to *tell* them what you expect. You can’t assume they know what you expect because others might not have the same expectations as you.

Indeed, most people don’t separate professional expectations from personal ones, yet they march into work expecting everyone to live up to both. But the longer our list of personal expectations, the fewer quality relationships we experience. The only expectations that belong in the workplace reflect the professional

standards that come with a given job or level of responsibility. Personal expectations are not related to performance. They undermine effectiveness, and usually are not communicated. They include expectations like: “People should work as hard as I do, come in early and stay late” and “Why can’t my boss have a sense of humor like I do?” Indeed, even if trust, respect, and communication are to be professional expectations, they need to be defined and communicated as a requirement of the job.

Determine if your expectations are personal or professional. Remember that professional expectations support personal responsibility and accountability, are communicated, and are agreed to by both the supervisor and the employee.

If our list of expectations includes only those that are professional, defined and mutually agreed to, everybody will be singing from the same hymn book. Feel the peace?

Still, it is amazing how many managers know they’re not clear about what they expect. They work by the “I’ll know it when I see it” method, which creates a lot of fear and shutdown on the part of employees.

Employees who take a high level of personal responsibility won’t stand for a boss’ lack of clarity. They ask those oh-so-important clarifying questions. They’re careful not to blame the manager for being unclear, but to explain that they want to get enough information so they can take full responsibility for the work they’re about to do.

Don’t you feel less fear when you know what to expect? The source of all conflict in relationships is a missed expectation. When you’re in charge, you give your subordinates a real chance of success when you make it your responsibility to be clear and vocal about what you expect.

Taking that one step will transform you from a boss who says, “I have pretty good employees,” to one who brags, “I have *great* employees!”

That’s not luck. It’s the result of being clear.

So take action! Take the risk! Cure your fear with action: Admit you have been unclear and then *get* clear. Focus your statements on results, not personalities, and see what happens. Tell your employees: “I’ve been unclear about what the definition of success is on this project and I see that now, so here is what my expectations are.” Admit to your boss: “I did not understand what your expectations were around the resource allocation for this project and I have been upset with the lack of clarity. I realize that now, so I want to take responsibility and ask a few questions so I can own this fully and produce the results needed.”

Is silence golden? In an October 2002 *Harvard Business Review* article titled, “Is Silence Killing Your Company?” researchers Leslie Perlow and Stephanie Williams explain that our silence comes out of a fear that if we speak up we will damage or destroy our relationship with our bosses or peers. In the end, though, “our silence creates an emotional distance that becomes an unbridgeable rift,” they conclude.

Either way, we risk that we will damage our relationship. Would you rather it happens because you took action or because you sat back and allowed it to happen?

At least if we take action we know where we stand with the other person. *The greatest cure for fear is action.*

