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## How to Give Instructions Your Employees Will Actually Follow



Staff don't always hear what you're trying to tell them the first time. The five-step method for crystal-clear communication

Merge Gupta-Sunderji || October 16, 2015

TOPICS Communication, Delegation, Employee Engagement

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**KICKSTART**

**H**ave you ever given employees what you thought were crystal-clear instructions about what you needed done, only to discover later that they didn't quite get the message? It's a challenge faced by many leaders, and happily, there is an easy solution.

To illustrate this approach, consider this scenario with one of my staff members: "Jasmin, have this report on my desk by 1:30 pm on Tuesday afternoon and make sure that there are no typos in it. Work on it tonight if you have to." These certainly seem like straightforward instructions, but I could make my message a lot more powerful and effective by following five simple steps.

Here is the ultimate method for giving directions so that your employees understand and act—the first time.

#### ASK, DON'T COMMAND

Simply by asking instead of commanding, my goal will be accomplished far more effectively. Instead of saying "Jasmin, have this report on my desk by 1:30 pm on Tuesday afternoon," I would do better to ask, "Jasmin, can you have this report on my desk by 1:30 pm on Tuesday afternoon?"

#### EMPHASIZE WHAT TO DO, NOT WHAT TO AVOID

Research has shown that it is far more successful to highlight what it is you want done (proofreading the report) rather than what you want to avoid (typos). So my message becomes, "Jasmin, can you have this report proofread and on my desk by 1:30 pm on Tuesday afternoon?"

#### EXPLAIN WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

If you want to increase the likelihood of getting the end-result you desire from your employees, tell them why what you're trying to communicate matters. In the workplace, we're dealing with adults.

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Chances are you didn't buy your parents saying "because I said so" when you were a child, so why would it be true for the adults you employ?

When I take the time to tell my employees why it's important, I'm much more likely to achieve my objectives. The new formulation is longer, but it'll save you having to repeat yourself later: "Jasmin, can you have this report proofread and on my desk by 1:30 pm on Tuesday afternoon? I have to present it at a client meeting first thing on Wednesday morning, and I want to make sure I have some time to read it over before the meeting."

### GIVE FREEDOM OF ACTION

If I've hired a good solid employee (which I have), chances are that she can figure out her own work priorities without me having to spell it out. No one likes being micro-managed, particularly if they're competent. So give your employees freedom of action. I can let Jasmin decide if she wants to work on the report this afternoon or tonight or tomorrow. I don't need to tell her to "work on it tonight if you have to."

### REMEMBER, IT'S A DIALOGUE

The best communication is always a two-way dialogue. So I need to wait for a response to confirm understanding, rather than delivering my message and then walking off to do whatever else is on my agenda. The sequence then becomes: "Jasmin, can you have this report proofread and on my desk by 1:30 pm on Tuesday afternoon?" \*Wait for an answer\*

If Jasmin says "Yes, no problem," then I'll respond: "I have to present it at a client meeting first thing on Wednesday morning, and I want to make sure I have some time to read it over before the meeting."

Alternatively, Jasmin might respond in the negative. If that's the case, I might say something like: "I have to present it at a client meeting on Wednesday morning, and I want a chance to read it over before then. What can you reprioritize to make this happen?" Notice that by letting Jasmin decide what she will move around to meet my deadline, I am still giving her freedom of action.

There are times when this final step may require me to be more straightforward, particularly if I am dealing with an employee with whom I have a track record of unsuccessful and unclear communication. Or, alternatively, I may be dealing with circumstances where lack of action could be disastrous. In such situations, confirming understanding becomes even more crucial than normal. I can do that by saying something like, "Sometimes I don't communicate as well as I should. Can you tell me what your understanding is in terms of the deadline for getting this done?" Once an employee repeats an instruction back and confirms understanding, the likelihood of me getting the outcome I expect goes up significantly.

While the self-deprecating comment about my own communication skills may seem like a sign of weakness or an unnecessary apology for something that is not necessarily my fault, it's invaluable. It takes the blame off the employee and allows him or her to focus on the task at hand instead of on now-hurt feelings.

*Merge Gupta-Sunderji is a speaker, author and consultant whose leadership development practice focuses on turning managers into leaders and people power into results. Through large-audience keynotes, small-group training, one-on-one mentoring, and customized consulting, Merge has given over 65,000 professionals in eight countries specific and practical tools to help them achieve leadership and communications success.*

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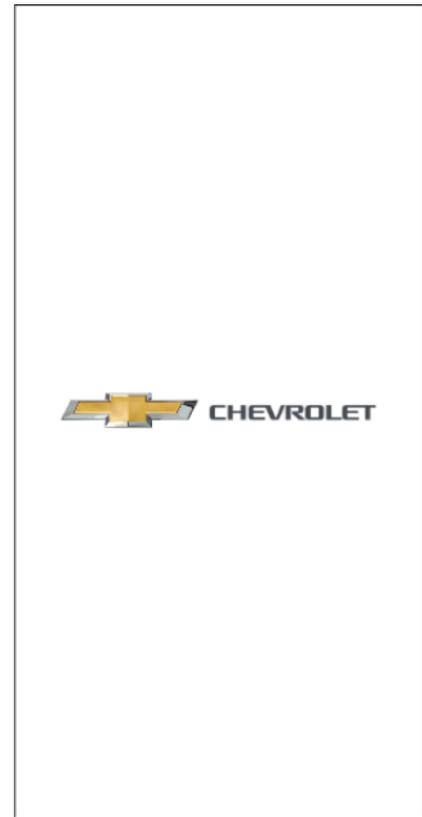
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