

Leader Time

Volume 1
Practical Advice for 21st Century Managers

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I owe a debt of gratitude to the following people:

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Peter C. DeMarco
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(clock-building) without getting to the point (telling the time). To get back on track, start communicating the *Whats*—the essential or need-to-know items—first. Then, explain *How* you arrived at the *What* only if further clarification can be achieved through the details. Done correctly, this technique is captivating and results in clear, concise messages that make it easy for listeners to focus, understand and engage with you. The paradox of this approach is this: your superiors will give you more time when they can trust you're prepared to be brief.

Sequence your messages

	First, tell the time	Then, if necessary, build the clock
Content	Communicate the critical WHATs	Dive deep into the HOWs
Sequence	Up front	Only if asked for more info
Level of Detail	Low detail; the “bottom line” only	High detail
Length of Message	Concise; 1 minute or less	As much time as necessary
Language	Clear, simple words; crisp sentences	Precise language specific to the situation; lengthy sentences & paragraphs
Example	“You have a problem that will cost you \$50 million to fix.”	The details, issues & sub-issues around a complex environmental problem created by the company’s local production facilities.

For more helpful tools, visit www.peterdemarco.com/leader-tools

Five ways to remove profane language at work

Q: Our workplace is filled with cussing from the CEO to the customer service rep. I hear f-bombs, s-words and JC/GD at least three or four times a week each. Right now, I am the only one reminding my coworkers to “watch your language,” but I know others are thinking the same. I’m starting to feel like the office grandmother at 34 years old! What should I do?

A: Don’t give up. Unfortunately, swearing seems to have infected many of our professional organizations. One survey reported that over 51% of employees swear in the workplace in front of coworkers (95%), bosses (51%) and even senior leaders (13%).¹ This proliferation of profanity has so numbed our culture that few of us feel or understand its damaging effects to performance.

Profanity is unprofessional and harms performance by damaging communications. In my experience, leaders who swear often are seen as less credible and harm their reputations because, frankly, followers expect better behavior.

Decorum aside, there are also very real morale, legal and performance risks to organizations that tolerate swearing—and equally as many reasons employees should stop swearing that affect the bottom-line. For starters, did you know that at least one federal appeals court ruling (*Reeves v. C.H. Robinson Worldwide, Inc.*) determined that vulgar language could be actionable as sexual harassment, even if not directed at one specific individual?

¹ Survey commissioned in 2012 by CareerBuilder and conducted by Harris Interactive; summary available at www.careerbuilder.com.

Should you give an underperformer one more chance?

Q: One of my employees is struggling to perform. He tries hard but fails. I want to be fair, but how many chances should I give him?

A: In baseball, the player at bat is given three strikes before being called “out” by the umpire. That approach is a good guideline for playing the game of business, but not always. Think carefully through the needs of the business and the employee’s circumstances and challenges before declaring, “You’re out!”

Consider the parable Jesus tells of the gardener and the fig tree:

There once was a person who had a fig tree planted in his orchard, and when he came in search of fruit on it but found none, he said to the gardener, ‘For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none. So cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?’ He said to him in reply, ‘Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future. If not you can cut it down.’¹

Even after three years of no fruit (three strikes), the gardener asks for one more chance for the fig tree. When the apostle Peter denies Christ three times, we see this parable applied to the future leader of the Church. Jesus gently rebukes Peter three times, then gives Peter another chance.² It seems

¹ Luke 13:6-9.

² John 21: 15-19.

that Jesus was the kind of leader who gave a person three strikes, then you get another chance!

In family-run businesses, the three strikes model often feels like 300 strikes. Owners struggle with (and reject) advice to remove an underperforming son or daughter from the business in favor of giving him or her one more chance. Sometimes the memory of past injuries stays the hand of adult justice. One mother told me, her words laced with sadness, “You have to understand, his father was rarely home when he was growing up because he was here at our business. I need this to work for the sake of our family, not just the business.”

Avoid “one strike and you’re out” or “zero tolerance” policies. During the Civil War at Gettysburg, the hero of the battle of Little Round Top, Joshua Chamberlain, made a momentous decision to forgive (rather than shoot) 120 deserters. “If you choose to join us and you want your muskets back you can have them—nothing more will be said by anyone anywhere.” One hundred and eighteen men joined him, and a critical battle was won because this leader gave the deserters just one more chance.

A few years ago, a news story caught my eye about a seven-year-old boy who



was suspended from school for pointing his pencil like a gun and saying, “Pow!”³ Wow, think about the cowardice of that kind of leadership. Is there a time when you shouldn’t give any chances? Yes, but the punishment should fit the crime.

³ See “Va. Boy Suspended for Pointing Pencil Like Gun,” *NBC Washington*, May 7, 2013. Available at www.nbcwashington.com.

provide excellent connectivity. For obvious reasons, these kinds of communications enable participants to read each others' body language and make a more "human connection." Face-to-face conversation also helps both parties maintain focus on the conversation instead of succumbing to the temptations to check email and multitask while listening on the phone.

The subordinate takes the lead in organizing

The organizing principle of a 1-on-1 (in most cases) ought to be the subordinate. In advance of the meeting, send an agenda with items you need to discuss with your boss and invite him or her to add other topics of importance. In addition, make sure you bring supporting materials or items to review. If your boss usually organizes your session, then double your efforts to take ownership of the process.

Formulate the takeaways you want to achieve

Aristotle said that what is first in intention is last in execution. Approach your meeting with an idea of what success ought to look and feel like. Tangible takeaways may mean asking your boss for help or suggestions about how to overcome obstacles you are facing in a project. Nobody likes to solve the same problem twice. So, if your 1-on-1's are on a regular meeting schedule, then it is the junior party's responsibility to summarize the actions both parties agreed to take from the meeting.

Bring progress updates or successes

Few of us like to focus exclusively on problems; both bosses and subordinates want to know where the good news is occurring, too. Small victories pave the way for larger ones, and often help people understand where their true strengths (or their organization's) are. Provide an update on your performance GOALS for the year or period in question.

Honestly assessing your progress or acknowledging what is expected improves understanding and expectations about how your issues affect the success of the organization.

Share your struggles

Too many employees fear talking about the obstacles in their paths. Help your leader coach you by identifying the difficulties you encounter (without whining), and the situations you don't understand. Frame the problem in terms of performance gaps to help your boss guide your next steps. Similarly, as a boss, acknowledging the difficulty your subordinate faces does not mean you are absolving him or her of the problem. Be prepared to offer constructive advice. Negative reactions from leaders can cause your team members to focus on "happy talk" and avoid discussing real issues.

Leave a gift

Consider the 1-on-1 as a gift-giving session. The first gift is time and the second is knowledge. If you are providing a senior executive with an update, leaving behind a one-page executive summary adds stickiness to your message. One executive left his CEO with market and regulatory updates and how they translated to the company's competitive position and goals. The CEO loved the catchy pages and they were often found taped up on the wall just above her computer screen. If you are the superior, leave your subordinate with an article to read and consider.

Leaders like to engage with people who respect their time. Followers like to engage with leaders who listen. What an effective combination for a 1-on-1.

Don't tell your boss what he already knows

Q: My boss gets easily annoyed with me. I try to explain things I think he ought to know, but he often interrupts and tells me, "I get it" or "I already know that." What am I doing wrong?

A: We all get annoyed when someone makes a show of telling us something that anyone with common sense would and should already know.

With due respect, this most likely explains the response you are receiving from your boss. Despite the caricature of the incompetent boss popular in today's media, most bosses reached their positions for a sound reason: They are good at what they do. And because they tend to be quite busy and have limited time, most bosses don't like to suffer through the obvious or be treated by their employees as if they are stupid.

To get back on track, *tell your boss something he doesn't know* but needs to know. Begin by changing how you communicate. Show that you can break things down into their relevant parts and explain the real relationships that exist among them.

Here are some steps you can take to make real contributions to the discussion with your boss:

Give permission

If you are uncertain whether your boss knows what you want to tell him, try prefacing your discussion with, "Stop me if I'm telling you something you already know, but I just discovered that..." Or use a different technique: "Hey boss, I know you know 'X,' but did you also know...?" If he knows, then move on to the next thing.

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Offer a new perspective

A person truly *knows* some *thing* (a process issue, a product problem, a system outage, etc.) when he or she can move beyond merely describing how that thing appears on the surface (which everybody else is also capable of observing) to explaining what *causes* that thing to behave the way it does.

In other words, there is no real knowledge without knowledge of causes. When a particular process or function is not working properly in your job area, your boss likely understands or recognizes what is happening on the surface, but he may not *know* what is causing the issue. So he naturally goes to where he thinks the real knowledge resides. You are currently not a person he views as in the know; i.e., containing real knowledge he needs, hence his exasperated reaction.

The Do's and Don'ts

Don't	Do
Dive right in to the details without clarifying the point of your discussion or ensuring that the timing is good for your boss.	Give permission to stop you if you are repeating information with which your boss is already familiar, or if your boss doesn't have time.
Opine off the cuff on topics about which you have little experience or knowledge.	Offer a new perspective on a topic or issue that you understand thoroughly and have constructive insight about.
Point out a problem that you haven't worked to find a solution for.	Take the initiative to work through problems on your own or developing potential solutions before taking them to your boss.
Stop thinking about an issue simply because it's too hard or unfamiliar, or because you have formed a solid opinion.	Explore all sides of a problem, questioning your assumptions and ironing inconsistencies out of your thinking.
Stick your nose into other parts of the organization, when you haven't taken care of your own work.	Demonstrate that you understand your own part and the key relationships to the other parts of the organization.

For more helpful tools, visit www.peterdemarco.com/leader-tools