

If you have a **non-talker**, you may need to hone your question-asking skills so that you are able to both get the information you need and also demonstrate an investment in this person's success, too. Non-talkers may choose to keep to themselves and prefer to be silent or quiet when they work. Or, they may prefer extra time for processing or reflection. For these folks, you can either give them some indication of the questions you may ask beforehand, or you may need to be (really) patient and allow some thinking time for them to process their answers. In another example, I had a weekly phone call scheduled with another manager. I would say, "So, what's going on in your region this week?" as an opener, and typically, he would say, "well, nothing much." If I were quiet long enough, he'd eventually begin to tell me what activities and events were planned, who was doing what, what he was thinking about, etc. Or, if he wasn't forthcoming, I could ask him some more probing questions based on things I already knew about: "what's the progress on . . .?"

Here's a story that might help. I once had someone who worked for me who actually talked more than I did. (my friends are all saying *who?* *who?*) She required lots of listening, lots of patience and lots of verbal processing. I surmised, correctly, that I did not have all the time in the world to do this sort of listening on a regular basis. I also knew, however, that if I didn't demonstrate that I had not only heard, but also listened to her, it might be an obstacle to her productivity and her confidence. It would seem to her that I was not invested in her success. I think there's a happy medium here—a formula for listening that might help, especially when you think someone might be "venting" or hanging out in "victim mode". Again, **Ask for What You Want:** suggest that if they have a problem that merits your analysis or response to suggest what they consider potential solutions and their ultimate recommendation. If you need more information so that you can respond, let them know you'll ask for it. This accomplishes two things—you encourage them to be empowered to solve problems in their work by preparing for your conversation and you get to be more efficient in your time usage.

NRS Principle 5: Move Over.

This is a tricky one when we consider the service leadership notion that it's *all about them*. If, as suggested earlier, the responsibility of a leader is to get things done through others, how will we know if they're doing it? How can we make sure if they're meeting the mission, the sales goals, the standards of excellence, or the level of productivity? Well, we just have to watch them like hawks. *We have to check in with them and have them demonstrate repeatedly that they know exactly what we want from them and that they can do it. We simply have to reduce the hours that we sleep because we are in control! We are in charge! We are responsible for the fate of the modern world if they do not get the task done at exactly 2:15!!*

Okay, to be fair, some types of work and some industries are more specific and controlled than others. In some professions, minute details, the minutest of minutiae matters. But *who* wants to lead others with this level of craziness?

First, we are responsible, to some extent, for the success of our workers or employees. This does not absolve them from responsibility, but, in the end, we should be able to look ourselves in the mirror and say, "I did everything I could do to set this person up for success . . ." and then, we need to let them do it. We need to be able to step aside, move over and let them go. What if this is risky? What if this involves people's lives or money? Then, you take small steps. You identify parts of tasks or projects that can be managed in a way that you allow for the necessary growth and development to occur. You build in safe ways for people to make mistakes so that they can learn and grow. And, you hold them accountable to the task and to the standard by balancing your respect for them as people and taking seriously the goal to be accomplished.

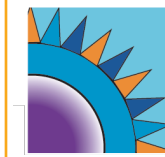
It really is about balance. If you move way over, and you provide no support and no direction for their work, then we're back to not asking for what we want and making them guess. On the other hand, if you are committing the ultimate leader sin, you're micromanaging every thing they do and driving them and yourself crazy. Plus, the real detriment to micromanaging is that they don't get to grow and develop in their own right and this can lead to frustration, discouragement and eventually apathy. That certainly doesn't create an environment of high productivity and morale!

Finally, I'm going to suggest something that you might think is sort of dramatic (my friends are saying, *who, you?*). I'm going to suggest that your role as a leader and a manager or supervisor of people is a sacred responsibility. Sacred. You are entrusted with someone's life, essentially, especially since we know that an average person in an average lifetime will spend 90,000 hours at work! Your direction and your translation of the organization or company's goals to that person and your alignment of that person's aspirations to the mission of your company or team or group is the key to what happens. I'm not making this up. There's plenty of research that supports the notion that the single most important relationship that anyone has at work is that between the person and the direct supervisor. If your higher up in the organization and your direct supervision of people is limited, you're responsibility then spans multiple people and multiple lives. This is a big deal. It is not about you, it *really* is about them. ❖

Libby Wagner

www.libbywagner.com | www.influencingoptions.com
6523 California Avenue SW #139 | Seattle, Washington 98136
p 206.906.9203 | f 866.451.5618
e libby@libbywagner.com

www.libbywagner.com



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Professional Leadership Results, Inc.

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It's Not About You

Recently, it seems, we've gotten even more self-centered and egotistical and downright surly with regards to what it means to be leading others. Once, I was interviewing a group of fifty correctional sergeants, many of whom had been working in the paramilitary world of prisons for their whole careers. My research centered around workplace learning and especially what these men and women thought it took to be leaders in an environment that was often dangerous and unpleasant. I asked them what they wished they'd known in the beginning of their work as leaders. One, a burly man with thick arms and a stereotypical crew cut, shared with me: "I wasn't a very good leader in the beginning. I thought being a supervisor and manager of officers meant I finally got to kick ass and take names," he said, "I wish someone had told me that this is about mentoring. This is about helping the people who work for me get better and even surpass me in their work. I could be helping some guy turn into my boss!"

Well, before you say, "well, I don't work in a prison. I never thought this was about "kicking ass" . . . maybe not, but although the concept of service leadership could certainly fall under the NotRocketScience heading, why is it that so many leaders do not follow its principles, at the cost of their personal productivity and their organization's success?

By Libby Wagner, Founder of Professional Leadership Results

What is service leadership? If you are leading others, whether you're in small business, or large business, it's not about you, it's about *them*. I used to tell my regional managers that their whole reason for being was to get work accomplished through others, and in this, they had choices to make about how to go about it.

When I teach leadership classes, I always ask participants to note characteristics of good leaders and poor leaders. Inevitably the top three choices for poor leaders include lack of communication, micromanagement and lack of support. If everyone *hates* to be micromanaged and if everyone *hates* to feel like they don't have the correct information or timely information, and everyone *hates* feeling like their leaders are not standing behind them or backing them up, why do we do it to others? Because we forget it's not about us, it's about them.

You can use the NRS Principles to examine service leadership:

NRS Principle 1: Lead yourself first. Make sure you are clear on what your own goals are. If you have a boss, collaborate to make sure you know where your organization is intending for you to go. If you're the boss, either take time to figure out where you're going by creating a *real* strategic plan or hire a coach to help you get clear. Ask yourself these questions: (need a graphic here or a model?)

- What is the **mission** of my organization?
- What are my **goals** for fulfilling the mission?
- **How** will I create opportunities to reach those goals?
- **Who** needs to contribute or come along?
- **What** is their role and/or responsibility?

So, for example, let's take my local garden center as a case study.

Mission : The mission of this organization is to help their customers create beautiful lawns, gardens and landscaping. They may offer

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quality plants and flowers at a reasonable price, create opportunities for learning by holding classes about pruning, planting and using color, serve as a resource for service providers to connect with people who'd like help in planning their landscaping or gardens.

Goals : The person tasked with the responsibility of managing perennials may have some goals for helping to support this mission, such as, offering both native and non-native plants and flowers, increasing sales of perennials by helping customers recognize the value of an increased price for those items that come back each year.

How : Good, solid product knowledge—specifics about the plants and flowers—will allow those working to be able to interact with customers who may be making decisions about what to buy. Or, perhaps on Sunday afternoons, when many people are either working in their yards or thinking about it, the garden center offers short work sessions on featured plants or flowers. Each person who comes into the center receives a flyer with the schedule and they run an ad in the local paper's living or weekend section.

Who (Roles and Responsibilities) : The people who work for the perennials manager need an opportunity to learn specifics about each plant or flower so that as customers are browsing the racks they will be able to answer questions, make suggestions and provide excellent service. The perennials manager should model interactions with customers that demonstrate an eagerness to help them create a more beautiful yard or garden.

So, what happens if the perennials manager chooses not to focus on the workers who are stacking plants, watering flowers or carrying shrubs? What happens if the workers do not know if a plant needs partial sun or full shade? There's a good chance that someone will plant something incorrectly, it will not thrive and they'll think that garden center sells poor quality plants . . . everyone loses!

NRS Principle 2: Ask for What you Want

Just about the worst thing you can do for a new worker is to leave the job up to him. Sometimes, in our worry not to micromanage or stifle someone's creativity in the workplace, we hesitate to ask for what we want, and you know what happens next—they have to guess! All the while, we're merrily proceeding, attending our important meetings and creating the big deals none-the-wiser that our employees are in great distress trying to figure out what they're supposed to do. I'm not just talking about someone who's green behind the ears and just out of college or just off the street. I'm talking about everyone who is new to a job or task, no matter their talent or abilities. If you take the time to ask for what you want, and they already know it, what's the cost? You're confirmed in your knowledge that they're headed down the right track and they're confirmed that they know what

they are doing so they can proceed with excellence as the goal rather than proceeding with trying to figure you out as the goal.

There are a lot of potential distractions and obstacles that can come along. What are the nuts and bolts here? If you don't ask for what you want, there's a chance you will lose **productivity** because the person may need extra time to make additional mistakes or re-start something that wasn't clear. You may lose out on **profits** because the focus is not on a clear goal but on something they have to guess about. You may lose **loyalty** because when workers do not receive the direction they need, their perception is often that you don't care about their success and you're setting them up to fail. This may not be your intention at all, but that's what it will feel like to the person who hasn't received your direction. This contributes to decreased **morale**. If success and excellence are mystical or illusive, people begin to wonder what all their efforts are for and why they are investing their time and energy into something they simply cannot be successful doing because they don't know what you want!

The worst part here is that when we assume this talented, creative, top level sales executive can read our minds, and then, he uses his skills from his past job or experience to make decisions, and then he gets something wrong—we're upset about it! We can't understand what happened! I'm not talking about holding someone's hand or babying a six-figure employee who "should know better", I'm talking about a relatively small investment—a short meeting to clarify goals and outcomes and identify any needs for support, development or resources—this has potentially huge costs to you if you choose not to do it because you are making assumptions. (Didn't your Dad tell you about this?) Remember, it's not about you—it's about *them*. Their success is your success—set them up for it so that everyone wins!

Thanks, Dad! I don't always follow it, but I try!

NRS Principle 3: Be Specific.

You know where I'm going here, right? Tell them what excellence looks like. If they need a model or example, a demonstrated behavior, a job shadow experience, or a sample report—*give it to them!* In my years in higher education, I was always mystified by professors who were unwilling to share the "secrets" of learning with their students. They didn't want to show them model essays or offer them a chance to practice a skill before being tested. The rows and rows of students, busily scribbling notes would gather in clusters on campus to analyze what they were supposed to be doing and learning, only to think their primary job was to *figure out the professor* rather than dive into the deep learning that the academy should provide. The lack of specificity is one of the biggest sins of leaders . . . there's a careful balance here, no doubt because too much specificity feels like micromanaging. It's not healthy, it's not prudent, and it makes everyone miserable except for the complete control freaks. (See Principle 5!)

Here's an example: some time ago, a woman who worked for me managed a team of employees who were expected to support one another's work even though their programs were very different. She had invested a lot of time in talking about "teamwork" and hanging posters about "teamwork" and talking more about "teamwork." One day, she called me in crisis mode saying that she wanted to fire one of her top employees because he "wasn't a good team player." I asked her what she meant by this. She said, "he's selfish and he's not a good team player." I asked her what she'd done so far in communicating her wishes with him. "I meet with him once a week and we go over his progress. I told him that others think he's selfish and not a team player and I asked him to come up with an action plan for how he could improve as a team player." I said, "how'd that go?" "Not well," she replied, "he's refusing to do what I asked! He says he'll do it, but when we get back together a week later, he hasn't come up with an action plan and nothing has changed." So, I wondered, had she defined "team player" for him, including some examples of the behaviors and practices that she expected? "No," she said, "he should know that. He's been in this business for a long time." Okay, I asked her if he'd ever done an action plan for her before? "Does he know what an action plan is? Did you give him a sample or some guidelines?" No. No. No.

Because this was a pretty serious situation—his termination was eminent—I made arrangements to fly to their location to meet with them. She and I spent the first day talking about what she wanted. I told her she could choose 3 behaviors (not 25!) that she thought demonstrated someone who was a good "team player" and then we identified some tasks that were within the parameters of his job and created a space for him to add his own ideas about how he might accomplish these goals. The next day, we met together. I could tell by his body language and tone that he was worried about losing his job. He seemed discouraged and defeated. We presented the sample action plan to him and spent some time talking about not only what she wanted as his boss, but also how he might accomplish those things *specifically*. I thought he was going to kiss me! He was so relieved to know what he was supposed to do! She just kept thinking that he was a smart guy, he should know what she was expecting. She kept saying the same things over and over to him and he would leave her office resolved to try to come up with something new to try to please her and do his work well. *He needed specifics*. This was about him, not her. Things got much better after that encounter, not only because she was willing to ask for what she wanted and be specific, but also because he felt like she was invested in his success rather than his failure. Yep—results included an increase in productivity, loyalty, and morale. (Did I mention this is *not* rocket science?)

NRS Principle 4: Close Your Mouth and Listen

Did you know that when people are learning something new, it often will take them a few seconds to do the synapse connecting they need

to do in their brains? Do you know the average time a teacher waits after she's asked a question of the class? *Less than 3 seconds!* Then, she impatiently goes on to answer her own question, or pose an additional one. Question asking can be one of the most effective ways to assess situations—assess understanding, assess knowledge or experience, assess feelings or assumptions. But, most of the time, we just talk and talk and we either don't wait for a response or we don't even hear it!

Listening is an essential part of leading. If we're not listening, we may make decisions based on incorrect or incomplete information. If you are able to ask for what you want (NRS 2) and be specific (NRS 3), then it's probably a good idea to check for understanding before moving on to the next, great thing you've got to say.

So, right off the bat here, I'll just go ahead and admit that someone could stamp "GUILTY" on my forehead and I'd have to own it. But no doubt, you'll be more disciplined than I was initially, and be willing to stop talking because, ahem, it's about *them*. Sometimes, because we are more experienced or we came from the trenches or we have more education or *whatever*, we, as leaders, think we have a lot of great information and advice to give. We think we've seen it all. We think we know everything. We don't. You know we don't. That's why we like working with people—they're never the same—they always surprise us!

So, what kinds of questions should we be asking? What kinds of things should we be listening for?

A few thoughts to consider:

If the person is a **talker**, you may have to demonstrate patience. I admit that this can be challenging sometimes and for me, it involved concentrating on the person, maintaining focus and demonstrating good listening non-verbal behaviors. Having said that, if the person is really a talker and it's just not practical for you to spend hours listening, use **NRS Principle 2: Ask for What You Want**. Once, I had a manager who worked for me who would call me several times a week on her way home from work. She wanted to debrief the day, telling me the details of her work, her staff celebrations and woes. 4:45 is not my best time of day. Over the phone, especially, I had a difficult time demonstrating respectful listening because I was tired and I often perceived the content of her calls as trivial. What I finally decided to do was to set aside a specific time reserved for her to update me about what was going on. This allowed me to listen for potential places to offer praise and recognition or to offer advice or support. It also allowed her to feel like I cared about what was going on with her, which I did, but I did so in a way that was practical in terms of my workload and energy levels.