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Helping you align your people with your vision



## Tell Me What You Want:

### Specificity Breeds Contentment

By Libby Wagner, Founder of Professional Leadership Results

**In the summer between my 8<sup>th</sup> grade year and high school, we found out that my dad was going to be transferred yet again to a new location. The whole lot of us had to pack up our bags, boxes and pets and trek across the country to go live in Richmond, Kentucky. I was horrified, dramatic, and threw myself on my twin bed in the basement sure my life was over—what kind of music did they have down there? Would I make any friends now that I would have to start high school without my junior high buddies? Little did I know my eight years in Kentucky would bring me lots of interesting experiences and intriguing journeys—and I would fall in love with the fiddle.**

Expect my delight then a couple of years ago to have a chance to see a really fun, talented group of musicians in the group of the Ian McFeron Band, based here in the Northwest. [www.ianmcferon.com](http://www.ianmcferon.com) Along with great guitars, a jazz drummer and sing-along vocals, they have a wonderful fiddle player in Alisa Milner who features prominently on one of my favorites—"Tell Me What You Want." It's a sort-of love song, of course, and the poor singer is lamenting his love who is mystified by his inability to hold on to her, make her happy, please her, and the chorus rings out with the exasperated refrain: "tell me what you want!" I thought about asking Ian if I could have this refrain to use as a theme song for one of my favorite leadership topics: specificity. (I know you were worried this newsletter was going to be a love advice column—read on!)

*Let me tell you a secret: you are not as specific as you think you are. I'd love to tell you there is rampant exception to this rule, but there is not, and before you think I'm pointing fingers, remember that I'm always willing to tell you about the things I've messed up so that you can be smarter than I! Or, as Ian says, so you can "spend a little less time on the floor."*

#### What's the big deal about specificity?

"Specificity is HUGE!" I've heard this more than once in my interactions with clients and workshop participants after we utilize the Core Dimensions exercise to identify behaviors that impact workplace trust. For some reason, when we stop to reflect on the impact high specificity, or the lack of specificity, has on our productivity, trust, morale, profits, customer service—we recognize how we might have fallen short, how we might have not offered enough information up-front to create the kind of result we really wanted.

#### Consider these Four Benefits for High Specificity:

1. **No Guessing:** why do we make people try to read our minds? We can get so caught up in thinking *they should know this or I've asked them before or they know what I like!* Who says they should know? Who cares? Really, you can stand there, not asking for what you want, and you get to be *right* all by yourself, and you don't get what you want. How's that feel? Is it working for you?! Don't make people guess; be specific, to the point, and see how the percentage of getting what you want increases.

2. **Spirit of Excellence:** when we are willing to ask specifically for what we want, sharing our ideas, our concerns, etc. then the person receiving the information from us believes we are invested in their success! We've told them how they can be excellent. We've shared our expectations or standards or benchmarks for high achievement. Instead of them having to figure it out from a lack of information or no information at all, we give them what they need to move forward and move up! It's one of those win-win things.

3. **Desirable vs. Undesirable:** Focus on what you want, not what you don't want. This is key! Sometimes, when we think we are asking for what we want, we are actually just creating a better picture of what we don't want in the person's mind. We give them a list of "don'ts" instead of a list of "do's" and we forget that when the brain hears "Don't slam the door!" the image created is that of the slamming door.

4. **Be Honest:** Sometimes we don't ask for what we want because we're afraid to be honest, or we're afraid the person will say "no." My speaking coach, Patricia Fripp, says, "the answer is always 'no' if you don't ask!" Don't be afraid of "no." Be afraid of holding on to a request, a wish or a desire and the risk of it going fallow—remember Langston Hughes' poem, "A Dream Deferred"? It festers or dries up like a raisin in the sun! In the workplace, we might be afraid of the person's response—what's the worst/best that can happen? You can deal with it.

While I'm humming "Tell Me What You Want," I thought I'd share what high levels of specificity might look like if you choose to do it, or if you'd like to receive it!

**In an organization:** high specificity means that

- Information is shared openly and freely. There are multiple ways to find out what's going on in the organization, including in-person, e-mail and print.

- Job descriptions and performance expectations are specific enough so that people know what excellence looks like and how they can improve, if they need to.
- Everyone's job function is aligned with the mission and vision of the organization—which is also clearly stated and regularly reviewed.
- The values of the organization—the way we agree to treat each other and our clients or customers—are described in behavioral terms.
- There is a clear strategy for managing ongoing change—people have forums for discussion, input and questions.

**On a team, high specificity means that**

- The goals and outcomes are really clear, including deadlines, processes and methodology
- Roles and responsibilities are agreed upon and carried out—follow-up and follow-through are the accountability benchmarks
- The leader is specific but does not micromanage—micromanaging is a lack of trust not an overabundance of specificity!
- Specific feedback and recognition are part of the team's process

**Within a Person-to-Person relationship, high specificity means that**

- If I have an issue or problem, I'm willing to come to you directly to resolve it
- I focus on desirable rather than undesirable behaviors
- I listen and respond with active listening to make sure I understand
- I offer feedback and praise when appropriate

Step up your specificity—you won't be sorry! And p.s. you can share this with your special, specific person—it works! Who said I didn't care about your love life? "Tell me what you want!" can be your refrain, too. ❖

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