

February 15, 2015

LOL: Clear Leadership

Clarity is a passion of mine. My colleagues at FCG will tell you that I go into spasms when a client responds to something we said with, “Huh? I don’t understand what you mean.” Argh! I tell my colleagues repeatedly, “that’s the worst thing we can hear!” Our job at FCG is to bring clarity to a client’s confusion. We help them sort out the issues and make good decisions. Bringing more confusion to a client is like a doctor bringing more sickness to a patient. First, do no harm! Or in our case: Don’t add to the confusion!

So, I was delighted when a client shared a book recommendation called, “Clear Leadership.” The tie-in with our work was the chapter in the book about appreciation. The author, Gervase Bushe, promotes appreciation as a powerful way to unleash the potential of an organization. My last two LOL’s have addressed that topic. Beyond advocating for appreciation, Bushe is excellent on the topic of clarity. He argues that much of the communication in firms is “mush.” That’s our experience at FCG as well. In Bushe’s words:

“Interactions between people are based on stories they’ve made up about each other that they haven’t checked out directly with the other person. I call this condition ‘interpersonal mush,’ and I am convinced that collaboration is not sustainable in interpersonal mush.”

To form a successful partnership with colleagues one has to eliminate mush. Bushe defines partnership as, “a relationship between two or more people who are jointly committed to the success of whatever process or project they are engaged in.” For senior teams (e.g. exco’s), FCG would simplify it down to, “a relationship between two or more people who are jointly committed to the success of their shared mission.” And to be successful in partnership, Bushe says four skillsets are necessary:

1. Self-awareness (emotional intelligence)
2. Descriptiveness (candor and transparency)
3. Curiosity (mutual understanding)
4. Appreciation (identifying and amplifying the strengths)

For those of you who have followed FCG’s work closely, you realize that this is exactly what we’ve been preaching for over 15 years. (When I first described “Clear Leadership” to Keith Robinson in my perky and animated excitement, he looked puzzled and asked, “Did you learn anything new?” His question gave me pause. Hmmm. Was I just excited because Bushe was affirming all of our belief systems?! Partly, yes. But also, Bushe has added some really good concepts and techniques to the toolkit.)

For example, Bushe introduces what he calls the “cube” and it captures the four important elements of one’s experience in a conversation:

Observing: what are the facts? What can we all agree to?	Thinking: What story did you make up about the facts? What is your opinion, evaluation, judgment?
Wanting: What is it that you want? What does a successful outcome look like?	Feeling: What is your reaction to the story? Does it evoke anger, sadness, joy, fear?

For clear communication to occur, it is very helpful to master the cube. Much of the “mush” in communication occurs because people don’t understand the distinctions. For example, people confuse observations (facts) with thinking (stories). Consider each of the following statements and pick out the observations:

- I observe you are upset.
- I observe he is hungry.
- I observe her working hard.

None of these is an observation! They are all thoughts (stories) about someone’s behavior. As Bushe writes, “to get clear, you need to be able to tell the difference between what you think, feel, want and observe.” FCG’s advice in this regard is to know the difference between fact and story, and then to hold your story lightly. (Because it is only your opinion, not the final Truth.) Further, both FCG and Bushe argue for the importance of “checking out your story.” For example, Friday FCG was with a client and the CEO said, “I’m irritated that David was in Boston and was too lazy to go visit our big client.” Keith and I both jumped on that one: “Have you checked out your story with David?” The CEO’s response, “No.” Untold damage occurs on teams (and in marriages) when we “run” with our stories instead of checking them out. So Bushe and FCG both argue that this is where curiosity plays a big role. Instead of getting judgmental—“David is lazy”—get curious: why did David not visit our client? (In this case, the CEO did check out his story later and found that David had indeed called the client to schedule a meeting but the client was unavailable for a meeting!)

Bushe suggests that good transparency on a team would mean that each team member could skillfully provide a description (i.e. the descriptive skills) of an event from all four quadrants of the cube. In the case above, the CEO might say, “I observe that David did not visit our client in Boston. My story is that he’s lazy. I’m irritated by that. Because I want our clients to receive world class treatment from our firm.” This would be an accurate description of what the CEO was experiencing in the here-and-now. Anyone listening would know where the CEO was coming from. And in this case, a really good suggestion from a colleague would be, “check out your story.” Teams that learn and practice this behavior eliminate much of the mush in their conversations.

The final quadrant of the cube—the “Wants” piece—is also useful in cutting through mush. Instead of guessing what people want, teach the team to state it explicitly. Bushe writes:

“One rule of partnership is that people have to say what they want. The second rule is that they shouldn’t expect to get it.”

We practice this rule often at FCG. We state what we want—I request such-and-such—and then allow team members to comply or not. For example, my request of team members is that they turn off their smart phones when we meet. If they do so, great. If not, well, that’s their business. At least I’ve made my request clearly. (Note: when we talk about requests, we are NOT talking about things like embezzling from the firm: “Please don’t steal our money.” That’s not a request, that should be an agreement with your partners!)

Another way to cut through mush is to use clear language. Be precise. Bushe writes, “If someone enters the room and feels cold, he is most likely to say, ‘it’s cold in here.’ Coldness is a sensation, an inner experience. I have canvassed rooms of people and found that some are cold, some are hot, and some are neither.” When we get the hang of this precision in language, we stop making statements like, “this is a fun company to work for.” Instead, we make an accurate statement like, “I have fun working here.” (Whether other people do or do not have fun is uncertain.) Owning one’s experience and making “I” statements can really help with clarity. I was with a CIO recently who said, “When you go and look at the stocks they’ve put in my portfolio, you just want to scream about the mess they’ve made. We’ve worked really hard to improve the process, but you look at their attitude and just have to shake your head.”

Obviously, the CIO is the one who just wants to scream. The “you” language is so prevalent that most of us have learned to translate it when we hear it. But who is the “we” that has worked so hard to improve the process? It turns out it was the CIO, but that wasn’t obvious until I asked. Bushe writes, “The rule of clear language is very simple—say ‘I’ when you are talking about your own experience.”

FCG would add that pronouns can get very complicated as well. Instead of saying, “He was unwilling to share resources with her because he knew that she would get upset.” Say: “Paul was unwilling to share resources with Mary because Paul knew that Susan would get upset.” This precision may seem a bit overdone but it is well worth the effort because it eliminates confusion. Some common examples of the confusion:

- We need to take a break (when really I need to take a break).
- We’re glad you came (when really I’m glad you came).
- It’s scary to tell the boss the truth (when really I’m scared to tell the boss the truth).

Bushe has some very useful and practical advice for leaders, such as “Make statements before asking questions.” Hmmm, you might wonder. Why do that? Bushe gives this example:

The boss says, “Do you support our plans or don’t you?” This seems to be a straightforward question, but what kind of “story” will it generate in the listener? One might infer undertones of distrust. Another might begin trying to imagine why the question is being asked. A third might think that her reservations

about the plans are clearly not welcome. Questions lead to more clarity all around only when they are preceded by descriptive statement. For example the boss could say, “Yesterday you seemed really committed to our plan when you were describing it to Sally, but today you keep hedging on your commitment. I’m feeling confused. Do you support our plans or don’t you?” Make a statement before you ask the question.

The book is full of these tips for clarity, which I love. Perhaps the most useful one is about candor. When FCG asks teams why they are less than fully candid, the most common response is: If I am fully candid, I might hurt someone’s feelings. The underlying reality here is that “most of us have been trained in one way or another to hold others responsible for our experience (i.e. you make me feel...).” Bushe gives this example:

Let’s say you work for me, and you start to tell me that the plan we are executing is not going to work. I start to get anxious, and instead of listening to your concerns and delving more deeply into where they are coming from, I argue with you about why you are wrong and why the plan will work. Or maybe, instead of arguing, I give you a pep talk about how it will all work out if we stay the course, and ask you to get on board. In either case, I am trying to get you to have a different experience about the plan so I won’t feel anxious. Rather than taking responsibility for creating my own experience (the anxiety), I’m implicitly making you responsible for my experience. You have to change so I won’t feel anxious!

FCG witnesses this form of mush week after week. Team members are unwilling to be honest about their views because they might offend someone. The remedy is to discuss and agree as a team that each member is responsible for his/her own reactions. And that it is expected of team members to candidly state their views as objectively and respectfully as possible, regardless of how others react. This simple understanding and agreement could profoundly transform a team’s conversations. I take responsibility for my reactions; you take responsibility for yours. Clear? Good. Now, can we talk...☺

Stay curious,

JW