

From the Commander • Leadership

Be Explicit: An Effective Leadership Tool for an Ethical Environment

by AJ PowellAdd Comment5 min read



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Let's talk about Ethical Behavior, shall we?

And in order to discuss the ethical behavior of professionals in the work place, we need to discuss creating an ethical culture. And in order to do that, we must identify any number of ways to prompt the creation of such a culture. And THAT is where leaders come in. You see, leaders are directly responsible for the culture within the environment they steward, and that includes the ethical behavior of their personnel...

Leadership is defined as the ability to provide purpose, direction, and motivation, while operating to accomplish the mission, and improve the organization... there is a LOT in that one statement, but while that says a lot we must ask ourselves, what are practical implications of that statement?

To answer that, we must first ask, what exactly is it specifically are you looking for?

I will come back to the purpose of asking this question in a minute...

In the world of professional aviation – both military and civil – individual leader’s personal styles of management practices often directly involve standardized communication. This standard of effective communication techniques – called Crew Coordination – is a massive part of nearly everything they do. As a result, what you’ll end up finding is that, while leaders in the aviation world may have their own individual style of management practices, very often that standard of effective communication techniques slowly alters the individuals application of leadership into a common form shared far and wide throughout the world of professional aviation.

What is Crew Coordination? Quite simply, it is a method of direct, concise, and effective communication techniques that allow for the provision of safety while accomplishing the mission.

Crew Coordination has 3 major parts, and the first is made up of 8 Elements:

- Communicate Positively
- Direct Assistance
- Offer Assistance
- Announce Actions
- Acknowledge Actions
- Be Explicit
- Provide Aircraft Control and Obstacle Advisories
- Coordinate Action Sequence and Timing

One could write a novel if we discussed each ones application in leadership, so let’s focus on only one: Be Explicit. And in doing so, now’s the time to answer our question, what exactly is it specifically are you looking for?

Leaders must *be explicit* in their communication, because those who work for you will be lost without that provision of purpose, direction and motivation. Simply telling your people, *Hey, Integrity is important*, is not the same as saying, *I expect absolute honesty and will hold you accountable to high standards and expectations...* (Treviño & Nelson, 2014) Subordinates are looking to *you* for leadership, they *should* see you as a mentor and a guide, but they will never live up to your expectations unless you communicate effectively your specific expectations and tie those standards to specific reasons. After all, they not only need to know the standard, but in many cases why the standard is the standard.

Simply put, people *need* to know *exactly* what is expected of them, and as a leader, it is *your* job *not* to beat around the bush...

Now, we started off discussing ethical behavior, so how is this important to ethical behavior?

As Treviño and Nelson (2014) point out, “Specifying concrete expectations for ethical behavior means going beyond abstract statements...” (p. 252). This means that we shouldn’t expect personnel to be mind readers, and if we want to take part in creating an ethical environment – which is *our responsibility as leaders* of that environment – then we must effectively communicate in an explicit manner our expectations for said environment. Back to our aviator example, they pride themselves on effective communication skills, and senior aviation professionals in leadership positions very often centralize their leadership approach around that foundation of effective communication techniques. By being explicit about their expectations, they are setting the standard for the culture and their ethical requirements; they are removing the guesswork. Further, by removing the guesswork, they are informing personnel of the very information followers seek... knowledge of the behavior(s) that will result in reward. Individuals, who have an explicit understanding of

the standard(s) required of them, are better setup for success, as they also know what will constitute a reward and what won't, and this goes a long way towards mitigating potential bad behavior while creating a positive, productive, highly successful culture, simply because social research has proven that individuals seek out behaviors that result in rewards, and avoid behaviors that are disciplined.

Now, none of this is to suggest that "Effective Communication" alone is the key to successful ethical leadership practice, but it is a big chunk of the leadership pie, and goes a long way towards promoting ethical employee conduct. Is there room for improvement? Sure! We can always find ways to communicate our expectations better. After all, leadership itself is the self-motivated practice of habitual self-improvement of the total self. There's always room for improvement, somewhere. But it all starts with you.

Set your team up for success, be explicit.

Sound Off!

What are YOUR thoughts?

In what ways do you think that explicit communication towards individuals and teams about your expectations can set everyone up for success? Can you think of – and describe – a chain-of-events that are likely to occur following explicit communication of expectations? From leader, to individual, to team? What about the opposite, can you think of ways that an individual or team is likely to fail to meet expectations due to a lack of a clear understanding about those expectations? And finally, do you agree or disagree with this analysis? Do you have anything to add, or maintain a different point of view?

Take a few moments to think about these questions, then write **your answers** in the **comments below** so the community can discuss, engage, learn, and grow!

Reference:

Treviño, L. K., & Nelson, K.A. (2014). *Managing business ethics: Straight talk about how to do it right*. Hoboken, N.J. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

About the author



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AJ is a retired U.S. Army NCO who served in both the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army. He is a combat veteran, and has participated in contingency operations around the world. AJ is the Owner of Veteran Leadership Solutions, the Founder and Editor in Chief of The Warfighter Journal, and is a published Sociological Analyst, Researcher, Guest Lecturer, and Public Speaker. He is a graduate of Pennsylvania State University with a focus on Sociology and a science degree in Organizational Leadership, and is published in the field of sociology. AJ is an inductive

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