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Pardon, me, but what did you say?

By Paperitalo Staff

I was raised in a family that was, how shall we say, outspoken? We tended to point fingers and accuse rather than finding a more diplomatic way to disagree. In business, this approach is career death. It has only taken me about thirty years to learn this, and, if you ask people close to me, they will tell you I am still a poor student. However, perhaps you are a quick learner; indeed, you may not even need this lesson at all.

Never, ever, approach anyone with an accusatory stance, no matter how stupid you may think his or her actions or plans are. Politeness is the first word of the day if you have any chance of changing their mind—accusations will only make them dig in their heels. By the way, you may think being the boss makes you exempt. In reality, the arrogant boss only fosters resentment and active passive-aggressive attitudes when they are not watching. If you wonder why as a boss you feel you have become a glorified baby sitter, this may be the reason.

Instead, go at it like this, “Bob, I have been looking over your plans for next week’s maintenance outage and I am confused. Can you explain _____?” Now, it is critical how you frame the question, for it can still be critical in nature if you do not carefully state it. For instance, “Can you explain the crane scheduling and how it meshes with roll changes in the first press?” is far better than “Can you explain what sky hook you are fantasizing in your pea brained head that will get the first press bottom roll changed on schedule?” Note the difference? With this method, you can continue to “drill down” with polite question after polite question until both you and the interrogated see things the same way.

In general being deferential and assuming you are the one that is confused will allow the other person to self-perform a prodigious hole digging exercise. Moreover, if you do it politely, they may even thank you for it at the end.

Email is another way we create hostilities. It has enabled everyone to perform “murder by memo” easily and quickly. For instance, an email that conveys the message “if I don’t hear back

from you by 8 a.m., I will assume you agree with me” especially if sent around midnight, will not motivate anyone to do what you want done. Treat others as want to be treated and you will be amazed with the response, and, more importantly, the willingness on their part to go the extra mile.

All this does not mean you should not be firm and decisive. No one likes a wishy washy leader nor will such a leader be followed far. However, firm and decisive does not mean being mean and demeaning.

In the northern hemisphere, we are in the full swing of summer. Please remember all the safety principles you apply at work while vacationing, and add one more—sunscreen. Most melanoma is preventable. We will talk next week. ##