

Bring out the best in
colleagues, customers, direct reports,
and your boss

Working **PeopleSmart**

6 Strategies for Success

**Mel Silberman, Ph.D. &
Freda Hansburg, Ph.D.**

Authors of the bestselling *PeopleSmart*



An Excerpt From

*Working PeopleSmart:
6 Strategies For Success*

by Mel Silberman, Ph.D. and Freda Hansburg, Ph.D.
Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

Contents

Preface	ix
Introduction	1
Strategy 1: Be Curious Rather than Furious	7
<i>Breaking In a New Boss</i>	18
<i>When a Customer Is Furious</i>	20
<i>When You Become the Boss of Former Colleagues</i>	22
<i>Understanding Your Boss's Priorities</i>	24
<i>Responding to a Critical Co-worker</i>	26
<i>When Someone's Performance Is Slipping</i>	28
<i>When an Unfamiliar Accent Interferes with Your Understanding</i>	32
<i>When Someone Is a Mystery You'd Rather Not Solve</i>	34
Strategy 2: Include the Listener Rather than Talk at Him or Her	37
<i>Making Complicated Assignments Clear</i>	48
<i>When the Clock Is Running</i>	50
<i>When Someone Doesn't Speak the Group Language</i>	52
<i>When You Owe an Apology</i>	54
<i>When You Don't Believe They "Get It"</i>	58
<i>When Your Boss Has No Time to Listen</i>	60
<i>Announcing Unpopular Policies</i>	62
<i>Making an Effective Presentation</i>	64
<i>When People Tune You Out</i>	66

Strategy 3: Speak Up (with Tact)

Rather than Suffer in Silence 69

<i>When Your Boss Asks Too Much</i>	80
<i>Getting Co-workers to Pull Their Weight</i>	82
<i>When You Lose Your Cool with Subordinates</i>	84
<i>When a Colleague Makes Unwanted Overtures</i>	86
<i>When the Boss Is a Bully</i>	88
<i>Dealing with an Underachiever</i>	90
<i>When a Co-worker Fails to Follow Through</i>	92
<i>When Your Boss Asks You to Do Something Unethical</i>	94
<i>When Someone Tells Offensive Jokes</i>	96

Strategy 4: Invite Others to Be Your Mirror

Rather than Your Blind Spot 99

<i>Coaxing Praise Out of a Stony Boss</i>	110
<i>When a Team Is Short on Feedback</i>	112
<i>When a Staff Member Needs Grooming</i>	114
<i>Delivering Your Resignation</i>	116
<i>Dealing with Gossip</i>	118
<i>Opening a “Clam”</i>	120
<i>When Your Boss Gives You a Verbal Warning</i>	122
<i>Handling a Chronic Complainer</i>	124

Strategy 5: Be Open to Resistance

Rather than Fight It 127

<i>Responding to a Customer’s Angry E-mail Message</i>	138
<i>Asking For a Raise</i>	140
<i>When Customers Don’t Return Calls</i>	142
<i>When Your Boss Springs Surprise Assignments</i>	144
<i>Encouraging a “Computer-Phobic” Direct Report</i>	146
<i>Making a Pitch for More Resources</i>	148
<i>Persuading Customers to Try a New Service</i>	150
<i>When a Colleague Thwarts Your Needs</i>	152
<i>When You’re Caught in the Middle</i>	156

Strategy 6: Think We, Not Me	159
<i>Getting the Team Spirit</i>	170
<i>When Team Members Lock Horns</i>	172
<i>When People Don't Participate Equally</i>	176
<i>When Everybody Is on Overload</i>	178
<i>Coping with Turnover</i>	180
<i>Getting a Team to Think Out of the Box</i>	184
<i>Collaborating with Other Departments</i>	186
<i>When Your Staff Are in Conflict</i>	188
Now What?	191
Index	197
About the Authors	205
PeopleSmart Products and Services	207

Strategy 1:

**Be Curious Rather
than Furious**



We all know people who challenge our ability to work people-smart. Do any of these “challengers” sound familiar to you?

Among customers, you might find “Carol Complainer”: *“Is this the best you can do?”*

Or “Harvey Hierarchy”: *“What’s the name of your supervisor?”*

Among co-workers, you might find “Needy Nan”: *“Can you help me out?” “Want to hear about my weekend?”* Or “Superior Stan”: *“Mistakes? I never make any . . . unlike you!”*

Among direct reports, you might find “Late Nate”: *“No, it was yesterday that the bus was late. Today, I had to take my son to the dentist.”* Or “Pathetic Patty”: *“I can’t do this! You’ll have to show me how.”*

Finally, your boss might be like “Ted Tyrant”: *“I’d rather be right than loved!”*

Or “Carla Cryptic”: *“I don’t have time to go over this. Just figure it out yourself.”*

When people at work engage in such unpleasant behavior, it’s only human to be annoyed or even furious. Typically, we might cope by doing any or all of the following:

- ☐ Avoid them whenever possible.
- ☐ Complain about them to a trusted colleague.
- ☐ Write them off as people who can’t or won’t change their ways.
- ☐ Respond in kind by being equally unpleasant.

As much as any of these challenging people at work may frustrate us, the people-smart thing to do is get curious as to *why* they act the way they do rather than merely get upset about *what* they do. This involves trying to develop an “empathetic understanding” of a person who is puzzling. What is it like to be in this person’s shoes?

You may not like or approve of the other person’s behavior. Certainly, no one should tolerate irresponsible behavior. Nonetheless, it pays to explore why the person acts the way he or she does.

- ☐ It may unlock new ways to relate to the person that will be productive for both of you.
- ☐ It may give you a new perspective on the person, help you get some distance, and avoid taking what the person does too personally.

- ❑ It may win the appreciation of that person and serve as the basis for a better relationship.

In contrast, failing to explore the possible causes of the person's behavior not only perpetuates the impasse but also leads to increasing frustration and, ultimately, cynicism. When we accumulate a list of too many "hopeless cases," we may become even quicker to write people off and find ourselves walled off from others.

Let's look at an example of how "furious" might begin shifting to "curious."

In the accounting office where I work as office manager, there is an accountant named Helen, who couldn't be more different from me. She always seems down in the dumps, grumbling under her breath and looking angry. She doesn't respond to jokes and never joins the rest of us in the lunchroom. She just focuses on her work and keeps reminding everybody how much responsibility she has.

I'm a much more social person. I always get my work done, but I also like to talk with people throughout the day, pass along humorous stories via e-mail, and so forth. If we were two of the seven dwarfs, I'd be Happy and Helen would be Grumpy. I know we also have significant differences in our personal lives. Helen is a single mother, living with her elderly parents in their home, both of whom have had some serious health problems. I am married and live with my husband and two of my three young adult daughters in our own home.

Have I written off Helen? I guess if I were in her shoes, I'd feel overwhelmed with responsibilities. Raising a child alone, caring for elderly parents, and then coming to a job where she's trying to help fatten other people's bankrolls, when she doesn't even own a home . . . that's pretty bleak. If I were in survival mode like Helen, some of the stuff I talk about, and certainly many of the e-mail jokes I circulate, would probably look pretty superficial.

What really prompted me to reconsider my attitude toward Helen was an office crisis. Someone made a mistake and overlooked an important deadline with one of the accounts. It was Helen who caught the error in time to request an extension. I still wouldn't want to live with my nose to the grindstone the way she does, but maybe she has a point about responsibility. It rocks my boat to think that perhaps I've been a bit smug in my attitude toward her.

Although she hasn't become Helen's buddy, the office manager has taken a crucial step forward in their relationship. By walking in Helen's shoes for a few paces, and accepting the possibility that Helen's differences aren't necessarily all deficits, she has opened the door just enough to gain a small glimpse of who may be on the other side.

Five Coaching Tips to Understand Other People Better

Whenever we become frustrated by another person at work, that frustration can eat away at our energy to perform at our best. The good news is that we have several opportunities to “become curious rather than furious.”

① *Take time to listen to this person.*

When this challenging person talks, give him or her your full attention, without “running your own tape” about what you'll say next. Try to avoid interrupting what he or she is saying or simply tuning the person out. You might even paraphrase what you hear the person saying, so that he or she gets the idea that you're really listening.

Undoubtedly, you've heard much of what the person is about to tell you before. People have a tendency to repeat themselves. We all have “stump speeches,” much like politicians. However, if you encourage the person to keep talking, he or she might go beyond the usual “stump speech” and tell you things he or she has never said before. That's when you begin to get the information to help you really understand where this person is coming from. You must make a clear decision that the other person is someone worth listening to and give him or her your full concentration. Imagine a spotlight shining on the speaker. If you are doing something else that could distract you, stop. Instead of working at your desk, for example, consider getting up and moving to another location, in or outside your office, to help you focus on the speaker. Instruct others to not interrupt your time with this person, if necessary. Doing these things may drastically improve how the other person communicates to you.

② *Ask this person questions about his or her thoughts and feelings.*

Use open-ended questions to draw out new information and clarify what you are hearing. This is especially important when you are trying to understand a relatively taciturn individual who keeps a lot inside. Open-ended questions invite the speaker to expand or elaborate on his or her message. They offer the person more leeway to respond and share. *“What was the upsetting part for you about what he said?” “How do you foresee things getting better on this project?” “Why do you think Bob was so quiet at the meeting?”* Use open-ended questions to encourage others to “open up” and share thoughts, feelings, and opinions. By doing so, you increase your chances of learning what’s really important to them. Moreover, the person may respond favorably to your attention and interest.

There are many ways to do this, such as stating or asking

- ☐ *“I’m not sure I know what your thoughts are about . . .”*
- ☐ *“Tell me more about this.”*
- ☐ *“What were your reactions/thoughts about . . . ?”*
- ☐ *“Can you give me an example or two?”*
- ☐ *“How come? Why do you feel that way?”*
- ☐ *“I’ve never asked you about . . .”*

③ *Consult other people who may have insights about this person.*

Who seems to have more success with this person? Ask for his or her perspective about your challenger and for suggestions on new approaches to try. Even if you find that everyone you know has the same feelings about this person as you do, they may have different ways of coping. You might approach a colleague and say, *“I’ve been really frustrated by _____. What works for you in dealing with him (her)?”* The person you are consulting may have some knowledge you lack or a terrific suggestion about how to deal with this challenging individual. If none is forthcoming, at least there are now two of you putting your heads together about this person rather than you tackling the situation all by yourself.

④

Try “walking in her shoes” by looking at events from this person’s point of view.

Imagine that you *are* the other person and ask yourself how a specific situation would look to you, what you’d be feeling and what your concerns might be. This is not an easy task. It’s hard to put aside your own perspective on the situation.

One suggestion is to appreciate that the other person may look at things differently than you do. For example, you might see the assignments you get as an opportunity to show others how capable you are. The other person might view assignments as simply a job to be done. Although we each have our own preferences and style, it’s important to recognize that different doesn’t necessarily mean better (or worse). Are right-handed people “better” than lefties?

Here are some ways in which the other person may be different from you:

Spontaneous	◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊	Careful
Social	◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊	Private
Emotional	◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊	Analytic
“Take charge”	◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊	Responsive
Competitive	◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊	Collaborative
Give opinions	◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊	Ask questions
Intense	◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊	Easygoing
Focused	◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊	Multitasking
Confronting	◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊	Avoiding
Self-oriented	◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊	Group-oriented
Respect for talent	◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊	Respect for authority
Loose	◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊ ◊	Rule-oriented

Reflecting on how the other person’s style may contrast to your own will help you appreciate “their shoes.” Notice, for example, that the opposite end of the continuum from “spontaneous” is “careful,” not “rigid.” A person like Helen, the accountant, someone who is less freewheeling and more deliberate than you, may have a unique contribution to make.

⑤

Try out some new ways to relate to the person.

Identify how you typically “dance” with this person. Are you avoiding? Critical? Forgiving? Demanding? Be curious enough to see what would happen if you acted dramatically different. For example, you might consider one of the following new behaviors:

- ☐ Take extra time to build rapport and establish trust with this person.
- ☐ Be firmer and more consistent about what you expect from this person.
- ☐ Take a positive approach by reinforcing and encouraging this person.
- ☐ Ask this person to tell you about his or her views, needs, and concerns.
- ☐ Back off on a big change; focus on little ones.
- ☐ Be more honest and straight with this person about what you think and feel.
- ☐ Be more persistent with your efforts to influence this person. Don't let up.



Coaching Contract

Think of someone you find challenging. Ask yourself, “Which of the five steps could I take to understand that person better?”

Looking at Challenging People as Anxious People

We realize that getting the energy to act on these five ways to understand others better can be a tall order. You may be so frustrated, angry, or pessimistic at this point in the relationship that it would require from you an awful lot of resolve to refocus.

One of the best ways to develop anew the energy to be “curious rather than furious” is to consider that all human beings, the challenging as well as the pleasant, have three basic human needs:

- ❑ *Control* is the need to have power over one’s life, to be in the driver’s seat instead of the passenger seat.
- ❑ *Connection* is the need for belonging, support, love, and acceptance.
- ❑ *Competence* is the need for success, for demonstrating mastery and being recognized for doing so.

At any given time, we may be anxious about obtaining one or more of these needs. To lessen the anxiety, we might go to one of two extremes: excessively pursue the fulfillment of the need or avoid situations in which the need arises. For example, someone who is anxious about *control* might act like a “control freak,” who needs everything done his or her way. In contrast, someone who is anxious about being in *control* may decide to let others call the shots. Someone anxious about *connection* might act like a social leech while someone else might withdraw or reject others. Someone anxious about *competence* might be a braggart while someone else might act like a failure.

Imagine you have a co-worker named Steve. Here is how you see him, if you look at him only with fury rather than with curiosity:

Steve is arrogant, opinionated, and sloppy about his work and yet highly critical of others. He often makes crude or insensitive comments to people and reacts very defensively to any type of suggestion or criticism, no matter how constructive.

Steve “stumbled” onto his job at our company, and the job is a little out of his league. He knows it. Yet he won’t ask for help or advice.

How might you apply the 3 C's (*control, connection, and competence*) to Steve in order to better understand his behavior?

Perhaps Steve is using his arrogance to push people away and avoid connection because he's afraid others will reject him. (And is it just possible that the culture at this company is not as accepting as it could be?) Or Steve may be very insecure about his competence and thinks that he's safer if he keeps people at a distance (and when a mistake leads people to conclude that you're "out of your league," can you blame him?). If we can understand Steve's anxieties, we may be able to relate to him better. For instance, maybe it would be better to connect with him, especially when he's not being obnoxious, and perhaps he'll feel more accepted and less likely to push people away. Maybe if his co-workers complimented his occasional successes, he might be more open to their criticism.

When you think about the people whom you find challenging, consider what may be making them anxious and use that insight to look at them differently and perhaps act toward them differently.

When someone is anxious about control, you might

- ☐ Keep him or her informed and up to date.
- ☐ Offer choices and decisions.
- ☐ Seek agreement ("I thought I'd do x. Is that okay with you?").
- ☐ Ask, "What role would you like to have in this project?"

When someone is anxious about connection, you might

- ☐ Make a point of showing the person attention when it's convenient for you.
- ☐ Tactfully and directly set limits when she or he wants too much of your time.
- ☐ Offer greetings or conversation in low-keyed, small doses.
- ☐ Ask a question you know she or he can answer "yes" to.

When someone is anxious about competence, you might

- ☐ Give genuine positive feedback when you can.
- ☐ Avoid putting the person on the spot in front of others.

- ❑ Give the person a task you know she or he can do successfully.
- ❑ Praise accomplishments matter-of-factly rather than effusively.

Now that we've offered you some general advice, let's look at some specific situations where the strategy of "being curious rather than furious" will pay off.

Breaking In a New Boss

Q:

“My new boss acts like he knows more than I do about producing our product, even though this is his first year with the company. He doesn’t show respect for my knowledge and competence. How am I going to work with him?”



Coaching Tip

Approach a challenging person as if you were an anthropologist.

A: When we don't like or don't understand someone, we have a tendency to write off that person and declare him or her a lost cause. Dismissing or labeling the person may give us a momentary sense of satisfaction, but it doesn't shed any light on the person's behavior. The people-smart alternative is to make a serious effort to understand the person's motives and perspective. This is not the same as liking or accepting the person; it's more like approaching him or her scientifically.

Once you've made the crucial decision to try to understand your boss, there are numerous ways to go about it. One is to ask him questions. That doesn't mean give him the third degree, but rather, interview him in a friendly way to learn more about his views and experiences. You might ask him how he's doing at getting used to the place, what he studied in college, where he's from, and so on. Listen attentively and responsively. You can also give some thought as to how differences between you may be hindering understanding. Differences in style, age, sex, and culture, for example, can sometimes lead to misunderstanding and conflicting viewpoints. If your boss is a young guy who grew up in the age of instant technology (whereas you didn't), perhaps the two of you have different expectations about how long it takes to learn something new.

You can also try to look below the surface and ask yourself what your boss might be anxious about. We all need the 3 C's: control, connection with others, and competence. But sometimes people are overly anxious about one or more of these issues. As the "new kid on the block," your boss may be anxious about whether people more senior than he see him as a competent, capable manager. People who are anxious about competence are very sensitive about appearing uninformed or out of their league in any way. Asking your advice may simply be too threatening a step for your boss to take right now. If you try to help put him at ease and acknowledge his strengths, he may become more open to you in time.

When a Customer Is Furious

Q:

"I hate it when customers unload on me. Whether they have a reason or not, people shouldn't just yell, complain, and carry on. Sometimes it's almost impossible to get a word in edgewise, and I feel like I'm getting ready to blow up, myself. How should I handle these unpleasant situations?"



Coaching Tip

There's a kernel of truth behind even the most outlandish complaint.

A: When a customer unloads, our instinct is often to strike back (*"Fine, Mr. Norton, then remove your own gall bladder!"*). Alas, this is not the people-smart approach. Instead, try these three key steps to pacify an angry customer: keep calm, identify the problem, and defuse the anger.

Keep calm. Although it's easier said than done, the first rule in dealing with an irate customer is not to take their anger personally. Do not become defensive. It will only make him or her angrier. You are the company in the customer's eyes, so try to personify the company and give it a compassionate, human voice. It may also help to recognize the customer as someone who is under a lot of stress at the moment. No one is at his or her best under those circumstances. By recognizing the customer as anxious and distressed, it will become a little easier not to take the anger personally.

Identify the problem. Listen. Offer empathy and acknowledgment by succinctly paraphrasing or summarizing what the customer says and by identifying how he or she must be feeling. Ask questions to elicit further information and to clarify the customer's concerns. Find the kernel of truth behind the complaint.

Defuse the anger. Show understanding and acknowledge the customer's point. It's crucial to disarm the customer's anger in this way before you go on to offer a solution, or he or she may not feel heard. When the customer says, *"This rental car is a total mess!"* you might say, *"Yes, used cigarette butts in the ashtray can be really gross. I'm sorry. That shouldn't have gotten by."* If the customer is venting without making a specific request, then after acknowledging their anger, you might reframe by asking, *"What would be a solution to this situation for you?"*

It's always tempting to meet anger with anger, but it's almost never productive to do so. If you can be curious when the customer is furious, the likelihood is that the customer will still be around long after his or her anger is gone.

When You Become the Boss of Former Colleagues

Q: *“I was recently promoted and now supervise several individuals who were my peers within the department. Most of them have accepted the change and treat me with friendly respect. One of them, however, seems to constantly test the limits of our new work relationship. She teases me about being the big cheese, even in front of others, and she pops into my office to pump me for information about what’s “really” going on in the organization. Not only that, but she even offers me all sorts of unwanted advice about how to handle others in the department. We had a pretty close relationship, but her behavior is making me want to avoid her now. Is there a tactful way to set her straight?”*



Coaching Tip

As a boss, you may need boundaries more than buddies. Don’t be afraid to draw them.

A: You might begin by giving some thought to what may be driving her behavior. Do you think she's afraid of losing her personal connection with you? Or is it more likely that she sees you as a shortcut to the fast lane? By trying to walk in her shoes and identify her motives, you may be better able to decide on the appropriate blend of reassurance and limit setting you can use to redirect her.

Certainly, limits are in order. Tell her calmly but firmly, *"I don't have time to talk right now"* or *"I don't have any news I can share with you"* when she invades your space or pumps you for inside information.

The most effective step you can take is to meet with her and provide some frank feedback about how her behavior is affecting you, along with a specific request for change. You can honor the peer relationship the two of you have had by taking her into your confidence—but on your terms. Tell her something like this:

"You know that I value your friendship and I believe I can be completely honest with you. This promotion has put me in a new role and I need some time and space to settle into it. I know you have lots of ideas and enthusiasm, but I'm going to request that you do something important for me. I'd like you to back off a bit for the next three months while I get my feet under my desk and learn my new territory. Please keep sharing your ideas in meetings and when I ask you for suggestions, which I definitely will. But it would help me a lot if you'd give me some leeway right now and let me be the one to come to you. Can you do that for me?"

It's unlikely she'll refuse such a graciously worded request. Thank her for her help and tell her you know you can count on her. By the time your three-month "grace" period has passed, she'll have adjusted to the change in your relationship. Or else one or both of you will have gotten promoted out of the situation.

Understanding Your Boss's Priorities

Q: *“My boss treats my ‘in box’ like his personal recycling bin. He turns over all kinds of projects to me with no clear indication of what his priorities are. I don’t like to keep bugging him with questions, but I need some kind of guidelines about what he expects. Also, some of these assignments are pretty boring and I’d like him to give me more interesting and challenging projects to work on. But I don’t know what’s important to him.”*



Coaching Tip

Walk in your boss’s moccasins—and keep a roadmap to remember the route.

A: Trying to grab your supervisor's attention when he's on the run is not a good way to seek his input about priorities. Instead, propose a meeting to discuss the issue and couch your request in terms of wanting to get a better handle on his current goals and concerns so that you can better organize your efforts to support him. Bring your "to do" list to the meeting.

There are various frameworks for assigning priority to tasks. One helpful approach is to consider three dimensions of any task. A project that scores high on all three is the one to start with. See if you and your boss can use this framework as a common language to discuss his goals and concerns.

Urgency. Determine how much external pressure there is to complete the task. Supervisors and customers are major sources of pressure to get things done. Deadlines create urgency as well. You need to understand how your boss perceives the urgency of the tasks he is delegating to you.

Doability. If a task is relatively easy to do and the necessary resources and support are available, it is likely to be accomplished quickly and successfully. You may be in a better position than your boss to assess the doability of a task he assigns you. If doability is low, it's helpful to spell out what it will take to do the job and how this may impact other projects.

Motivation. Here's where your interests come into play. You want more opportunity to work on projects that challenge you. But you need to know more about your supervisor's wish list in order to link your interests to his.

When you meet with your boss, rather than starting with your task list, ask him questions about his current goals, concerns, hopes, and interests. See if you can interpret back to him where the items on your task list fit in. Your aim is to be able to think about assignments the way he does. You might reflect back: *"It sounds like x, y, and z are probably the top priorities right now. I'll get right on them. If I can clear some time by the end of the week, are there any special projects I could start on to help you prepare for your meeting with Briggs next month?"* If you can think of something you'd like to do that would mesh with his needs, suggest it.

Responding to a Critical Co-worker

Q:

“One of my teammates constantly belittles my ideas. He even makes faces and wisecracks during meetings when I speak. I feel like throwing a cup of coffee at him! Why would he treat me this way?”



Coaching Tip

When someone is getting to you, get a handle on them.

A: Snipers like your co-worker try to elevate themselves at the expense of others. Behavior like this can be infuriating and really tests your ability to work people-smart. But try to get curious enough to answer your own question: Why does he do this? Are you a threat to him? Is he so insecure in his position that he's going to these lengths to look important? Does he crave attention? Use your insights to head him off at the pass.

If you can stand it, try reaching out to him in a proactive way. Share your ideas with him ahead of time and ask for his feedback. Find something you like or respect about him (even if it's just his taste in ties) and comment about it to others. Give this approach a few weeks. You may find that he now derives more self-esteem from being your ally than being your critic.

If this doesn't work, focus on how you respond to his stealth attacks, especially when others are present. When he makes a face or a negative comment, stop your presentation. Just look at him for a long moment, then calmly ask him to share his specific concerns. Stay focused on content and don't refer to how childish his shenanigans are. Try saying something like *"Jim, you seem uncomfortable with this. Please tell me what your reservations are."* If he resists, press him: *"No, please, I'd really like to hear your thoughts."* When he does share, invite others to react. They may become your allies. Depending on the situation, you may also want to acknowledge his implied criticism, but insist on finishing what you have to say (*"Jim, I can see you have some issues. If you'll hold your thoughts for another ten minutes, we'll have some time for discussion when I finish the presentation."*). The principle here is that the sniper is most comfortable shooting from the sidelines, wearing his camouflage gear. By shining a floodlight on him, you expose his game and take control of the situation.

When Someone's Performance Is Slipping

Q:

"One of my direct reports seems to be on the skids. He's normally a good worker, but lately his reports are just not up to par. When I tried to discuss it with him and offer some suggestions for improvement, he got really defensive. I feel like I'm in a bind. I don't see how I can just ignore what's going on, but I don't want to pry or get inappropriately personal either. What's the best way to help this guy?"



Coaching Tip

Don't rush to solve a problem before you understand it.

A: A doctor wouldn't treat symptoms without making a diagnosis. A good mechanic wouldn't try to fix your car without figuring out what's broken. Before you can resolve whatever problem is going on with your direct report, you need to understand it. We suggest you "interview" rather than interrogate him with the goal of learning how **he** sees the situation.

Interviewing is a form of active listening aimed at uncovering information—without putting the other person on the spot. When you interview, key behaviors include the following:

- ☐ Ask questions and dig for deeper understanding.
- ☐ Solicit the other person's viewpoint, while holding back on your own.
- ☐ Seek clarification and illuminate how the other person is feeling.
- ☐ Demonstrate understanding of what the person is sharing.

Make some time to sit down with your direct report, and start by stating in a calm, straightforward way that you've noticed that his recent reports aren't up to his usual high standards and you'd like to understand how he sees the situation. You might ask, "*How do you think this report compares with what you usually turn in?*" Once you get the ball rolling, make a point of being receptive and responsive to anything he says. An excellent way to do this is by paraphrasing.

When you paraphrase, you feed back, succinctly and in your own words, the most important elements of the person's message. Paraphrasing gets a bad name because people often do it poorly, either by parroting the same words the person just said or by using some hackneyed formula, like "*so I hear you saying . . .*" In contrast, when you capture and reflect the heart of what someone tells you, you begin to gain the person's trust and encourage her or him to open up further. So the interview with your direct report might sound something like this:

You: *"How do you think this report compares with what you usually turn in?"*

D.R.: *"All right, well, it's a little below par. I'm sorry."*

You: *"So you're not entirely happy with it either. Can you tell me what you think may have contributed to the change?"*

D.R.: *"Well, since Jim was transferred to sales, I'm not getting the same information I used to get. I guess the report suffers for it."*

You: *"You sound frustrated."*

D.R.: *"I am! I don't like doing a second-rate job, but I don't see how I can produce the same quality in the same time with less support."*

You can move to a problem-solving mode after you have adequately explored the situation. Your solutions are more likely to be effective when you understand the problem.

this material has been excerpted from

***Working PeopleSmart:
6 Strategies For Success***

by Mel Silberman, Ph.D. and Freda Hansburg, Ph.D.

Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

Copyright © 2010, All Rights Reserved.

For more information, or to purchase the book,
please visit our website

www.bkconnection.com