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## Under the Microscope

### How your words and actions keep employees focused—or don't

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You're being watched. By every employee, at every turn.

They're looking for clues about what you're thinking, what you expect, and how the business is really doing.

Despite signs the economy may be starting to turn, most employees remain on shaky ground, nagged by insecurities and uncertainties. It doesn't take much for their performance to become distracted or even paralyzed.

Now's the time to be intentional about every signal you send. Your words and actions have never been watched more closely—or been more important.

During good times, leaders have the latitude to play it a little loose and fast. An isolated misstep or quirky inconsistency is likely to go unnoticed. But during scary times, intentionality is the watchword...being consistently mindful, transparent and disciplined about even the most subtle messages you're sending employees.

It's not just about the words a leader speaks—in fact, that's only a small part of it. Employees are scrutinizing what and the way decisions are made, how the boss spends his time, his body language and tone. They're studying how he shows up as a leader.

Many leaders trip up their organization's success by not paying attention to these nonverbal ingredients. Typically well-intentioned, they're oblivious to the underlying message they're delivering or the havoc they're wreaking:

- **The Mute.** We've all encountered this one: the leader who chooses to not say anything at all because he doesn't have a handle on it yet. ("It" being the size of budget cuts or the final product line changes or which individuals will be affected by the restructure.) The Mutes kid themselves into thinking that if they're not talking about it, no one's thinking about it. The reality: employees sense when something is in the works—and a leader's silence is nothing other than gasoline fueling a bonfire of anxiety and rumor.
- **The Fortress Keeper.** This is the boss who seems endlessly tucked away behind closed doors...the team might get a fleeting glimpse of him as he darts out to the bathroom or cracks his office door for the sandwich delivery guy. Employees respond by feeling invisible, devalued and out of the loop, at a time when they need some good old fashioned in-your-face leadership. Tough times call for tough decisions—and no one begrudges a leader some private space and time for reflection, planning and crucial conversations. But a leader who sequesters himself like an arrogant king in a castle gets exactly what His Majesty does—eventually, the peasants on the other side of the moat revolt.

- **The Procrastinator.** The Procrastinator craves certainty about the future before setting a course or making even small commitments. But direction and decision are exactly what employees need from their bosses during tricky times. In an attempt to avoid risk, The Procrastinator only adds to it: employees are left to wonder what's important, what they should be doing, and how in the world the business is going to survive.
- **The Fidgeter.** Darting eyes, twitchy legs, tapping fingers. At best, employees are stripped of any real confidence they have in their leader. At worst, they think he's flat-out lying.
- **The Scatterbrain.** With quirks that might charm or amuse otherwise, The Scatterbrain simply infuriates during challenging times. These are the leaders who can't recall what they said yesterday, forget to follow through on commitments, absentmindedly provide different direction to different people, and sometimes seem utterly incapable of stringing a meaningful sentence together. Confusion, inefficiency and rework reign. If employees aren't throwing up their hands in frustration, they're throwing Prozac down their throats just to stay sane.

If any of these descriptions seem close to home, the opportunity is yours. By being more deliberate about your words and actions—and how they're received and interpreted—you can reduce employee anxiety, create focus and drive better performance.

## A Checklist for Deliberate Communicators

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Before sharing news or information with your team, take time to think through how you'll both deliver and demonstrate it:

### Get clear on the message

- \_\_\_ *How does this news, decision or development impact my team?*
- \_\_\_ *What's the one thing that matters most for employees?*
- \_\_\_ *What specifically do I need and expect employees to do?*
- \_\_\_ *What will it look like if we're successful?*

### Own the message

- \_\_\_ *Do I understand the message myself? Do I have the context I need?*
- \_\_\_ *Do I believe in the message?*
- \_\_\_ *What do I need to do to feel confident delivering the message?*
- \_\_\_ *What tone will I strike? How will I reflect that in my words, voice and body language?*

## Model the message

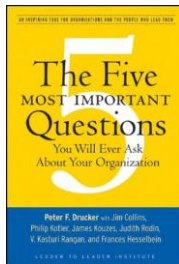
- \_\_\_ How am I spending my time? Is that consistent with the message?
- \_\_\_ Am I being transparent about my own behaviors and decisions—and how they tie to the message?
- \_\_\_ How will I recognize teams and employees for desired behaviors?
- \_\_\_ What behaviors or habits of mine might undermine the message? What will I do differently?

## Listen and watch

- \_\_\_ What questions will I ask of employees to gauge their understanding? How will I know if my message has been received?
- \_\_\_ How—and through what forums—will I cultivate two-way dialogue with employees?
- \_\_\_ How will I stay closely connected to what employees are thinking and doing? How will I know what’s getting in their way?

## Our Take On It: Commentary and opinion on the books that shape our thinking

THE BOOK: *The Five Most Important Questions You Will Ever Ask About Your Organization*



If you’re craving the next Gladwell, Godin or Blue Ocean, this isn’t the book for you.

But that’s the appeal of *The Five Most Important Questions*.

The book is a 100-page revision of the late Peter Drucker’s *Self-Assessment Tool*, published in 1993 to help non-profit organizations clarify their purpose and focus their direction. Drucker’s original writings are speckled with fresh commentary from six present-day leadership authorities, among them author Jim Collins, the Rockefeller Foundation’s Judith Rodin, and Harvard Business School professor V. Kasturi Rangan.

While the book’s nonprofit roots are apparent, the contributors rightly point out that the same thinking applies to all sectors—nonprofit, business and government. Leaders of individual teams or departments should take note too.

*The Five Most Important Questions* has special relevance right now—at a time when economic turbulence and marketplace uncertainty is turning business on its head. In the scramble to survive, we’re seeing a tornado of knee-jerk decisions and rash actions, detached from any organizational “center” or anything else remotely enduring.

Drucker’s five questions offer a substitute for this sort of pinball leadership: a framework for thoughtful assessment and deliberate action about what you are doing, why you are doing it, and what you must do to improve performance.

1. What is our mission?
2. Who is our customer?
3. What does the customer value?
4. What are our results?
5. What is our plan?

Five simple questions that aren't so simple to answer. But doing so honestly empowers an organization or team to put its stake in the ground...to commit to what's important and to admit what's up for grabs.

It's this sort of lucidity that will see a business through. Jim Collins puts it this way: "...the great paradox of change is that the organizations that best adapt to a changing world first and foremost know what should *not* change; they have a fixed anchor of guiding principles around which they can more easily change everything else."

*The Five Most Important Questions* is not a book that you flash around in your business reading circles. This is a book that sits humbly on your desk as a back-to-basics resource—and a constant reminder of the need for deliberate reflection, clarity of focus and purposeful action.

Recommended for:

- Leaders about to undertake 2010 planning
- Communicators developing their organization's story
- Individuals leading a department or team for the first time