

# The Deblieux Report

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## THE DIRECT REPORT RELATIONSHIP<sup>1</sup>

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**YOU GET PAID TO LEAD. YOU CANNOT LEAD UNLESS YOUR DIRECT REPORTS WANT TO FOLLOW YOU. SIMPLY PUT, LEADING COMES FIRST, FOLLOWING COMES SECOND.**

Think about it this way. You manage a team of ten direct reports. You call in sick Monday morning. Everyone on your team reports to work. They are here. You are not. How much of the work of the team will get done?

On Tuesday, you report to work. Your ten direct reports call in sick. You are here. They are not. How much of the work of the team will get done?

If you answered the Tuesday question with “all of the work,” you should lay-off your entire team and ask for a raise. If you answered, “not much” to the Monday scenario, you understand how important it is for you to select, develop, and support each member of your team. You understand why leadership depends on an effective relationship between you and each of your direct reports.

Being the “boss” is a special responsibility. It puts the security, the career, the aspirations, and the paycheck of each direct report in your hands. It is a relationship unlike any other in your life. Let’s look at it through five key questions.

Notice that each of our five questions is asked from the perspective of a direct report. It may seem unfair, but your answer to each of these

questions does not really matter. You can think you do each of these things perfectly. You do not get to be the judge. Your direct reports do.

### QUESTION NUMBER ONE: DO YOU THINK I MANAGE MYSELF EFFECTIVELY?

Peter Drucker wrote a masterful Harvard Business Review article titled, [Managing Oneself](#). You should read it carefully.

For our purposes, managing yourself is about what your direct reports see, hear, and experience every time they interact with you. In an interview with an executive coach, Nicole, one of Joe’s direct reports said, “Do you know that Joe wears socks that do not match?” Terry, another direct report said, “Do you know that we look out the window every morning to watch Joe get out of his car? We can tell by the way he closes the door what kind of a day we will have. We know whether to have our head up or down when he walks in the office.”

These may be extreme examples, but they make the point – every management action, has an employee reaction. Everything you say and do (or do not say or do for that matter) affects the engagement level of your team. Ask yourself how employees will react to each of these management actions:

- Manager cancels one-on-one meeting with little or no notice,

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<sup>1</sup> This is the third in a trilogy of articles about important relationships in the life of a workplace leader. Download the first two articles, The Boss Relationship and The Colleague Relationship at <http://www.deblieux.com/the-deblieux-report/>

- Manager arrives at a staff meeting ten minutes late,
- Manager does not wear a required name badge,
- Manager's office is cluttered and disorganized,
- Manager rushes into the office each morning without acknowledging direct reports.

Everything you do affects how your direct reports view you. Their view determines how much credibility you have with them. When the scale tips too far in the wrong direction, they stop following. They may stay around, but they are not following. They may come to work, but they are not engaged in their work. Chances are, they are spending a lot of time in HR talking – talking about you and how difficult it is to follow you.

### QUESTION NUMBER TWO: IS IT SAFE TO BE VULNERABLE UNDER MY SUPERVISION?

People like to talk about trust. But, where does trust come from? Trust is an outgrowth of vulnerability. You trust people who make it safe for you to be vulnerable. You feel safe when you can ask a “dumb” question without being ridiculed. You feel safe when you can admit a mistake and get help learning from the mistake.

Your direct reports expect you to make it safe for them to be vulnerable with you. (it is not necessarily fair, but your direct reports are not always as forgiving over your mistakes.) As one person put it, “Why would you want to work for someone who is not helping you to learn?”

The world is not perfect. You are not perfect. Certainly, there are times when you get frustrated over a direct report falling short of a performance expectation. You are entitled to that frustration. The way you handle it, however, determines whether your direct report thinks it is safe to be vulnerable with you.

If your emotions control your reaction, you lose credibility. You risk claims that you are a bully or

that you harass or discriminate. Your direct reports expect you to deal with most business issues as business issues, not personal issues. Sometimes, you have to take a deep breath before you react. In all cases, your direct reports expect you to give them a chance to explain their side of the story before you react. They expect you to help them learn from their mistakes. They understand there is a limit to your patience – that repeated mistakes will garner a more serious reaction than a first mistake – but they expect you to know the difference and to handle it appropriately.

### QUESTION NUMBER THREE: DO YOU KNOW HOW I KEEP SCORE?

(For an excellent dissertation on this question, read [The Three Signs of a Miserable Job](#) by Patrick Lencioni. Pay particular attention to Immeasurement.)

As a manager you tend to assign a task, but measure a result. Let's take a simple example. You hire a new employee. You take them to their cubicle. You tell (assign) them to answer the phone on their desk if it rings. You return to your office. A few minutes later, you look out your doorway. You see the new employee reach for the phone. They put it up to their ear. You hear them say “Yo” in a loud voice that carries throughout the office. They answered the phone. They accomplished the task. They did not produce the result you expected. It is easy to get frustrated with the employee. It is easy to say they should have known. The fact is you assigned a task. You measured a result. They did not know how you would measure their success. They did not know how you would keep score.

The interesting thing is that when your direct reports understand your expected result (Answer the phone in a manner that causes callers to report you are friendly, courteous, and helpful) they focus on producing it. They come up with creative, innovative techniques that did not occur to you. They frequently do more than you expected.

## QUESTION NUMBER FOUR: WHAT IS ONE THING I DO THAT HELPS YOU IN YOUR PROFESSIONAL ROLE? WHAT IS ONE THING I DO THAT GETS IN THE WAY OF YOUR PROFESSIONAL ROLE?

You are right. It is two questions, not one.

We usually ask people, "What can I do better?" In [Thanks for the Feedback](#), Sheila Heen and Douglas Stone suggest it is better to ask, "What is one thing ...?" They suggest that if you ask several people for one thing, you will get a short list focused on a particular trait.

One particularly successful manager, asked each of her direct reports these two questions once each quarter. She used their answers to adjust her leadership and communication style to their needs. She not only listened to their answers, she demonstrated that she valued their answers.

One of the most difficult things for all of us to do as humans, and particularly as managers, is to see ourselves in the way that others see us. Your direct reports see what you cannot see (you) every day. They know your facial expressions, your tone, your posture, even your smells! You do not. You think you do, but you do not. Effective workplace leaders hold an imaginary selfie-stick in front of them to learn as much as they can about how direct reports evaluate their effectiveness. They do it through one-on-one meetings. They do it by watching the reactions of others as they interact with them. They do it by asking questions like the questions we are discussing in this article.

## QUESTION NUMBER FIVE: DO I HAVE A "HUMAN CONNECTION" WITH YOU?

A funny thing happens on the way to becoming a workplace leader. You separate yourself from your direct reports in small increments. Those increments add up. They sometimes lead to direct reports saying:

- "We are just a number."

- "We don't matter."
- "Our manager doesn't care about us."

One employee put it this way, "I have worked here seventeen years. Our vice-president has worked here for twelve years. She could not find my cubicle if she had to."

This is a tricky one. You cannot be too distant, but at the same time, you cannot be too "chummy!" One manager loved to hunt. He took a special four day trip every year. Three (male) of his five direct reports went with him. Two (female) did not. He swore the trip had nothing to do with business. The two who did not participate felt quite to the contrary. The annual trip resulted in inside jokes, access to special information, and other seemingly small tidbits being shared. The manager's credibility was seriously damaged by the trip. While neither employee filed a formal complaint, both left. The manager was befuddled by the loss of two "really good employees."

Your direct reports expect you to see them as individuals. They expect you to take an interest (within limits) in them. They expect you to be "in the moment" when you are with them. They do not want you to be nosey. They do want you to care. They do want you to take an interest in who they are and what is important to them.

## CONCLUSION

Your relationship with your direct reports is a two-way relationship. It starts with you. You have the position. You have the authority. You have the power. Your direct reports see, hear, and feel how you use it. They decide if you use it correctly. They use their decision to decide how much energy and effort they will put into their work. Your challenge is to understand their thought process to help you constantly self-evaluate and adjust your leadership style. You can only do that if you take time to ask questions and listen to the answers.

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