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Helping Leaders, Individuals and Teams  
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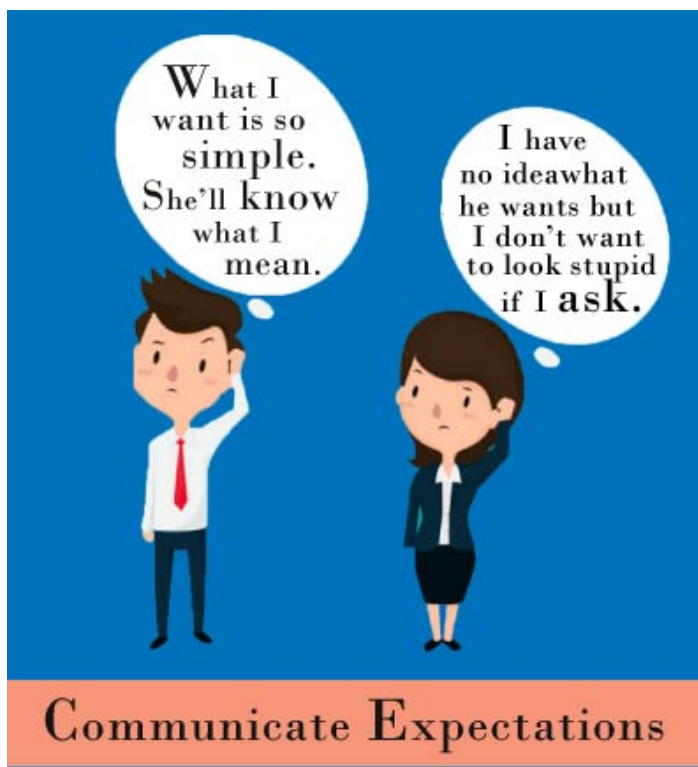
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### ***SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO BE "THE BOSS" - PART III*** **Pre-empting the necessity for difficult conversations**

October 2020



### **Article Dedication**

This article is dedicated to the man who inspired it, a great manager of mine, George Hughes.

One of the reasons my consulting practice is built around helping teams succeed is because I had the privilege of working on an amazing team, known statewide for its peak performance and ability to work well together. We became family to each other. I credit that largely to our manager, George Hughes.

**He never missed an opportunity at a staff meeting to talk about the standards we needed to have as a region staff.**

**This is the 3rd in a series of 3 articles about being the boss. The first was about the need to step up and handle the difficult situations. ([Click here for article #1.](#)) The second was about how to have difficult conversations. ([Click here for article #2.](#))**

**I would tend to put the majority of workplace difficult conversations into two categories – performance issues and behavioral issues.**

**Let's start with performance issues.** Rarely are people completely incompetent to do a job they've been hired for. Although it happens, perhaps because of nepotism or other reasons that didn't involve some sort of vetting process, but by and large, people have the basic qualifications. So how do you, as their boss, help them to succeed and avoid a difficult conversation because they aren't performing?

### **1. Start with clear expectations of their work.**

I recently talked with a manager who told me his method of dealing with new employees was to let them go, see what they can do and then see whether they sink or swim. Ahhhh, bad idea dude! Employees, especially those young in their careers, often struggle to figure out what the boss wants from them. They see choices of direction and don't want to waste time going in the wrong direction and don't know how to please, but are often timid about asking the boss too many questions and looking like they don't have a clue. Well, when that's the case, I look to the boss. Often times, you may have a clear picture in your head of what you want, and it seems like common sense to you or simple enough that a direct-report should be able to figure it out. OK, so stop right

Some of the things I remember him saying are, "We return phone calls to [clients] within 24 hours and sooner if possible", "If one of us fails, we all fail." He set up events where every staff member made part of the presentation. It bonded us and showed our clients that all of us were a team and we were all accessible to them. We double-teamed difficult situations. We always had backups for each other so that we had someone to step in during a crisis who was already up to speed. We had the ability to trade pieces of our work so we could each do what we were best at. For example, I always did Mike's complicated excel tables and he always did the research I needed on case-law. I hated researching case law and he hated excel work. So both jobs got done better and more efficiently by working as a team. George always modeled what he preached. I once settled a labor strike late one night and to get the employees back to work the following day, it meant I had to have everything reduced to writing by morning. It was already 11 pm. George was just leaving the office. When he realized what I had in front of me, he took off his coat, put down his briefcase and said, OK, let's get to work. That is the epitome of teamwork. We worked through the night and it took both of us to get it done. I'd have never gotten it done by myself. I always knew the whole team had my back and I theirs. That was largely because George vocalized the expectations and behaviors he wanted for our team.

there! IT ISN'T simple enough! It's called being unconsciously skilled. You have so much knowledge that you've had for so long, you don't realize everybody else DOESN'T know something that is common sense at your level of expertise. Part of the skill of being the manager is to get what's in your head out through your mouth.

**You cannot expect others to do what you have not clearly communicated! It's not their fault if they don't meet expectations you never communicated to them, it's yours.**

For some practical help with setting and communicating goals properly, see my June 2018 article "Top Down and Bottom Up Goal Alignment" ([Click here](#)). Note that all my previous articles are on my website and free to download and share.

## **2. Check-in, observe and realign along the way.**

Once you communicate your expectations, it's also your responsibility to have regular check-ins to assess progress and then affirm their progress, redirect or adjust as needed so the individual is on-track to do what you want, the way you want and have it completed when you want it. It's also good to do some independent observation. Look at what they are producing – documents, reports, etc. to be sure what they're telling you is actually what's happening. If it doesn't match up, before jumping to conclusions that they are telling you one thing and doing something else, it may simply be that their interpretation of expectations and yours aren't clearly aligned and clarification is needed.

**Now, let's talk about behavioral issues.** Lest I be too philosophical here, dare I say our behavior

**He was also deliberate in his team building by putting opportunities in place for us to practice and demonstrate that culture to others and in doing so, solidify our team relationships.**

The point of sharing this story, is that because George was clear about performance expectations as well as behavioral expectations, because he modeled what he said about both and because he kept us on track, he rarely, if ever, had to have difficult conversations with any of us.

**Leadership is about communicating clearly your expectations around both performance and behavior/team culture. So be bold, be kind and be clear about both!**

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*Communicate*  
*Expectations*  
*Model*  
*Behavior*  
*Support*  
*Encouragement*  
*Pay Attention*  
*Kindness*  
*Clarity*

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**Complimentary  
No-Obligation**

comes from what we've come to understand as acceptable within our group – be it family, friends, school, workplace, etc. It may also be what we've been allowed to “get away with”. We may have bad behaviors that no one has ever challenged us about. It's also about what reaction we're trying to get to feed our own psychological needs. So, we're actually right back to expectations.

### [3. Start with clear expectations around the culture you desire.](#)

Changing or creating culture can seem daunting. In reality, it isn't all that difficult if you are deliberate about it. What I mean by that is that there are natural points where you can “set” expectations around culture. One is when you are a new manager to a team. When you come in, you can begin by setting expectations around culture and then rewarding it when you see it and calling it out when the opposite occurs and redirecting. (Be careful about calling folks out in front of others, however.) Another is when a new team member joins. You have the opportunity then to define from the outset what the expectations are around how the team works together and what behavior is expected and the type of behavior that is not tolerated.

But what if you're not a new manager and your team members have all been there for a long time. Then you have the opportunity to create a conversation around culture and start some new cultural goals for the team. A great way is to interview each team member about what's working and what's not. Then share what you heard, protecting anonymity, and asking the group to create a new procedural agreement to create some new norms about how you all as a team can work better together. You also have the right as the

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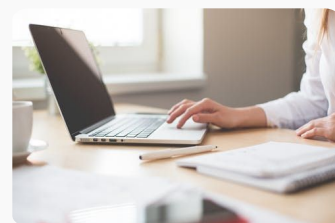
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Think through complex and sticky issues

Re-examine your perspective when appropriate

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manager to set some things yourself. You might say something like, “I realize this is getting in our way, so starting now, here’s what I’m asking all of you do begin doing. I’m going to hold you accountable and I’m asking you to also hold each other accountable. This will make us a better team.” If you need help with approaching this whole concept, reach out to me. This is something I work with teams to do all the time.

#### **4. Monitor and reinforce cultural expectations.**

Pay attention to whether folks are practicing the behaviors you expect. If not, remind the group, and then narrow down to remind individuals who are not complying. If you don’t monitor and reinforce the expectations, then they will simply fall by the wayside and you’ll get what you get.

Set the tone, set the expectations, model the behaviors you expect and let them know you’re watching and you’re holding them accountable. Also let them know you have their best interests at heart – wanting the whole team to work well together, have a great team culture where everyone will want to help each other and make it a place everyone enjoys coming to work. This will make the team more successful and you can celebrate the success together. Just remember, you’re the boss, so you set that tone, and they’ll be watching you too – so model what you say.

With clear expectations for work performance and behavior, your difficult conversations should be fewer if non-existent! Enjoy the fruits of being the right kind of boss.

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## Joy Conley Kacik

**Joy is a conference speaker, team and leadership development consultant, customized trainer and facilitator and a Certified Professional Coach with expertise in personal career coaching, job offer and salary negotiations and executive coaching.**

As an Insights Discovery® licensed practitioner, Joy provides clients the added value of the Discovery® Portfolio of tools when working with individuals, teams, leaders and organizations to create inspiring visions for collaborative, cohesive teams to produce superior results.

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