

The 'naked' chiefs guide to communication.

If you get e-mail from "Naked Leadership", there is no need to trash it with the rest of the porn. This one is fair dinkum. Australian-born founder and presenter David Bentley explains: "The idea of the 'naked' part of Naked Leadership, is: "Shedding all of the preconceived stuffiness that we think about in management to turn it into leadership where your authority still shines through. And you will have fun with it, because you won't take yourself too seriously..."

Bentley's initial leadership skills came from his Air Force career during the 1980's after which he developed his program from his subsequent business experience. This included almost a decade working in the US, most recently in senior management positions with Continental Airlines, where he was involved in the now famous turnaround of that airline from "the worst to the first".

During that time Bentley led large and incredibly diverse work groups, drove large scale initiatives in an extremely competitive environment, was responsible for leadership training for this company of 60,000 and was also appointed a general manager of airport services.

He is currently MD of training company Success Quest, and has recently finished writing a book about leadership and symbolic "nakedness".

"When I was in the Air Force, I always felt there was something missing from the leadership model in the human equation." Bentley says.

"The Air Force teaches directive leadership. There's not a whole lot of engagement in getting the person's buy-in. It's more a directive-which is "I'm in charge, you're the subordinate and you'll do what I tell you to do."

"It might be appropriate in the military but people come unstuck when they translate that into the civilian world where people can and will argue with you.

"The military is still using models from the turn of the century and before, and the reason why they had to have very strict models was that typically, the soldiers were very uneducated.

"So you had people who didn't have a great deal of experience in the world whose understanding of relating to other human beings was very poor. The best way to get the correct action out of them was to put the 'fear of God' into them so they'd do exactly what you – the educated person- told them to do."

To a certain extent, Bentley's example was also true in the workplace until the

"Gordon Bethune is a great leader. He took Continental Airlines from bankruptcy to the No 1 airline in a matter of a couple of years, and the way he did it is by doing the kinds of things that I'm talking about."

- David Bentley

1960's when everyone started getting an education.

"Isn't that interesting?" he says. "The whole world changed dramatically about 30-35 years ago, but I don't think our leadership techniques have changed with it."

Bentley believes leaders do not have the skills to effectively negotiate to get employees 'buy-in' without giving away their authority.

He says they have yet to learn how to engage the person's will to do it without forcing them to do it.

"We don't know how to do that yet; we're very conflict-averse. So we tend to tell people what to do and when they get it wrong we ignore it and ignore it and ignore it-until they really do something bad and then we try to fire them.

"The core of Naked Leadership is about the employee, not about the leader."

These observations prompted Bentley to develop his own ideas on leadership

including his Seven Naked Clues of Communication. He outlines them;

1 Set Clear Expectations

Tell your leadership team to "set clear expectations". If the employees are not absolutely clear about what is required and they fail, it's the leader's fault, not theirs.

So many leaders give vague expectations and then look around for someone to punish when things don't work out.

"You didn't tell me to go down to the shop, go three streets, turn right and pick up the paper; You said

"Go down there and pick up the paper" – Well I've never been there before!"

We assume a lot and then we beat up on the employee because they didn't get the job done.

2. 'Shut up and listen'

The manager holds a meeting and says "Shut up and listen..." because they're so uptight and nervous about confrontation. They're angry because the situation has gone bad and they're probably getting pressure from their boss. So they march the employee into the office and deliver a speech that usually ends with the words "or else...!"

Instead, they should be saying to the employee "Tell me what your experience has been. Tell me what your understanding is of it."

Ask them a question about their training and really listen to what they say and then make an assessment. The ratio of talk is the wrong way around.

The rule is 80:20. Whoever owns the problem talks 80 per cent of the time and the other party only talks 20 percent

3. Support Them While they learn

Support employees while they learn because they won't necessarily get it right the first time.

At A Glance

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You have to allow people room to realise they've made an error and instead of beating up on them, say, "OK how far did you get before things started going wrong? What happened then?"

Go through the process with them in a non-confrontational way. Then they get relaxed and they don't become fearful of making the decisions in the future.

4. Show Empathy not Sympathy

We seem to have a great affinity for taking on the emotion of the situation and for getting angry because we're under pressure. This is a complete waste of time and energy.

The angrier you get the less objective you are and the more likely you are to put your foot in your mouth.

So Empathy says "Take your emotions out of it." Engage the employee instead and sell to them that it's good for all of us if we do it right the next time.

Second, do not get emotionally involved if they have a personal problem; It totally distracts you from what you're there for. They start crying and you fall in a big heap.

If someone comes in and says "I didn't do my work because I'm really upset", reply by saying "OK I understand all of those things. Which of them can I help you with in a work situation?" They may say "Oh? Er...none of them I guess."

"All right, so what can I help you with while I'm at work?" They realise that they can't play games with you and that you're on the ball."

"You're not a professional counsellor anyway-that's not your job. Not only that, I know of people who've been sued for giving advice."

5. Let Them In on The Secret

If it's appropriate and there are no restrictions, why not tell them and explain what you're doing and why.

Tell them why the company's going through and explain to them where they fit in.

Tell them their score and tell them how their production impacts on the company, where the money comes out at the end and how much is left over at the end of the year to pay everybody and buy a new computer.

Give them a reason to be interested in what's going on. Some of them won't be but a lot of them will.

6. It's their Challenge; Let Them Solve it

How many managers have an employee come to them and say "I've got this big problem; I've got all this stuff going on..." And the manager says "Leave it with me; I'll take care of it."

And the employee goes "You beauty" and walks out the door and all of his or her problems are solved.

Not only that, but by the time six other employees have done the same, the employee comes back and says,

"Richard Branson has a lot of the qualities we talk about; he'll sit with his most junior employees, he'll serve drinks on a plane when nobody expects him to...he'll do the weirdest things. He has destroyed his own hierarchy and people feel comfortable enough to tell him what's up with his company before he finds out through the balance sheet."

-David Bentley

"You know my problem? Have you fixed it yet?"

But wait a minute, who's working for who here?

So make them understand whose job it is and that it's their responsibility to do it. If they need help you'll provide it from time to time but otherwise it's up to them.

They're empowered to do their job and they have the responsibility to do it.

7. It's not what You Do, It's How You Do It."

This is the linchpin of the whole construction. We get adversarial with employees because we don't have the skills to negotiate with them successfully from a place of confidence.

The only skills we have -verbal interaction-were probably learned from our parents. We aren't taught in school or in college and because we are very good at our job, no-one has ever said "By the way there is another 50% to your job-communication and let's train you how to do it!"

So someone who was yelled at and screamed at by their parents or alternatively frozen out when they did something wrong, reflects back those attitudes to their employees. As soon as the pressure comes on, they've got no other frame of reference.

Changing Times

Times, they currently appear to be changing. Some have said that September 11 marked the death of Postmodernism; others have shut the door on globalisation; still others believe that we are looking at brand new leadership models but Bentley isn't getting too excited.

"I don't think the essence of how people work and why we do the things we do, will ever change nor have they changed. "I think what we've actually seen is a much more tempered response from our leaders and the leaders from the US than perhaps we would have expected 30 years ago, when we would have had everything on Red Alert and we would have been pointing guns at everybody.

"Instead, what we did see immediately afterwards was a measured silence, a bringing together of people. If you look at the consultation, there's been a huge effort to draw in the very people that we're tempted to get angry at by generalisations.

What we're actually seeing is the type of leadership that I'm talking about, beginning to evolve.

"Where once we would have slapped people around the head and yelled and screamed and made lots of noise, we're now saying "As upset as we are, the best way to solve the problem is to involve everybody."

And if you watch the newscast, that's what you're seeing all along the way."