

Checking Behind The Smiles

How To Avoid Being Ambushed By Undisclosed Discontent

By Kendall C. Wright, President of Entelechy Training and Development, Inc.

Today's workplace looks a great deal different from that of our grandparents. The magnitude of changes in philosophies, protocols, and partnerships would make the current workplace unrecognizable to many of our foreparents. But it isn't just the way we do business that would catch their eye. They would also notice the wider swath of humanity occupying many roles that in past had only been staffed by a very limited and narrow demographic. Time as brought some changes.

Along with these modern changes, there are also different requirements of leaders. The importance of so-called "soft skills" has never been higher, and that importance is sure to escalate. Gone are the days of being a "technical genius" but an interpersonal Armageddon. That model is dead. With extremely few exceptions, people are fed up with bullies and blowhards. Today, it takes more than one-dimensional excellence to be an effective leader. While that is absolutely true, direct reports also expect a leader to be a person of integrity, as well as a person capable of showing empathy. This combination of technical and soft skill competence is the tall order of the day. A leader missing on either account will find garnering the authentic commitment of the general population an extremely daunting task.

With the confluence of cultures in the workplace, the willingness to trust, and in turn, to proactively bring concerns to the forefront has decreased. If the work environment hasn't proved itself to be receptive to the needs or challenges of the full gamut of human differences, those who are (most) different may opt to simply grin and bear it - for the moment. But as a leader, don't be lulled into a false state of security. A grin can be transformed into grimace. This is critically important, just because everyone seems to be smiling doesn't mean everything is fine. If you don't find out what, if anything, is hiding behind the smile, and do so expeditiously, you may find yourself in the middle of a crisis - and you won't have a clue how you got there. As the 1971 chart topper by the Undisputed Truth reminded us, "Smiling faces sometimes, they don't tell the truth."

While it is common for a leader to assume that things are "cool" and everybody is getting along, that may not be the case. If you haven't provided a forum or mechanism to address and resolve issues in an open and honest manner, then that unexpressed discontent will continue to fester, intensify, and permeate your sphere of influence. And all the while, you're *assuming* everything is copacetic. That just may be a faulty and fatal assumption.

When it comes to leadership, assumptions are killers. Assumptions kill trust, respect, productivity, and profitability. Actually, to simply assume everything is all right, without exploring the accuracy of your assumption, can be considered either naïve, arrogant, or both. I will even go so far as to say leading by assumption is a cowardly way to lead. Leading by assumption requires no courage at all, in fact, a leader who isn't proactively seeking out the points of disharmony at their earliest manifestation is, in effect, feeding a beast that will eventually emerge as a full-blown monster. In today's workplace, a leader can't afford to be skittish in seeking out the presence and source of team disharmony and discontent.

As plainly as I can possible say it – afford people the opportunity, the space, and the tools to address their concerns as early and as frequently as possible, otherwise what were once inconveniences will be catastrophes.

Leader, are you preempting catastrophes by checking in with your team on a regular basis? Are you demonstrating your sensitivity and awareness to the human dynamics at play in your team? If not, then you setting yourself up to remain in a state of perpetual crisis management. Being mired in perpetual crisis management is the penalty of reactionary leadership.

It stands to reason that you can't address issues of which you are unaware. This is why you must get behind the smile. Here are 5 strategies to help you explore behind the smiles of your direct reports and associates:

Communicate Your Desire To Learn. Your team may not be aware or convinced of your interest in knowing about the challenges they are confronting. Help them to appreciate your genuine desire to learn more about the inconveniences while those inconveniences are still small in relative impact. This starts with putting real issues on the table without become defensive or dismissive.

Provide Education and Training. You can't expect your team to master the skills of workplace respect and individual accountability if they haven't been properly trained. Provide opportunities for learning, and follow that training with strategic reinforcement of the key principles presented.

Establish New Team Norm. Norms govern how the team interacts with each other. Establishing a norm regarding the respectful resolution of conflict, no matter what the level or intensity of the conflict, is important to keeping a balanced harmony in your team dynamic.

Inquire and Invest. Ask your direct reports to be candid with you about their experiences as members of the team. In doing so, you will simultaneously learn about any potential problems, while investing in strengthening the quality of the relationship.

Take Action. Taking action is the hallmark of an exceptional leader. Leaders are commissioned to take action, not merely make observations. Once you become aware of a challenge, marshal the required resources to address that challenge as quickly as possible. The longer you procrastinate, the higher the probability of a blow up.

These 5 strategies provide the insight and instruction to go behind the smiles of your direct reports. Start the process today. You just might give your team something to smile about.

Leadership Lesson: Given the complexity and volatility of today's workforce, a leader can't afford to be caught off guard by undisclosed disruptive team dynamics. Never be lulled into thinking that just because your direct reports are smiling, that everything is all right. You must take the time to explore what is going on behind their smiles. Over time, grins are transformed into grimaces, and smiles become scowls, as so-called small issues remain unaddressed. It takes courage to seek out the undisclosed discontent of your team. Find the courage today.

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Kendall C. Wright, "The Actualizer," CEO of Entelechy T&D, Inc., helps business leaders -at all levels- fulfill the hard parts of their job descriptions. He has spoken in 49 of the 50 US States, 20 countries and 5 continents. He is the author of *Affirming and Confirming SuccessFUL Living* and *Conversations On Success*, featuring insights from Les Brown, James Kouzes and other top tier international speakers. Find free resources at www.EntelechyCan.com. Contact us at Kendall@EntelechyCan.com or 513.368.LEAD (5323)