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The Power of And

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And. Such a simple word. It's technically called a coordinating conjunction, along with *but* and *for* and *yet* and three other words. Yet, replacing the word *but* with *and* is a powerful leadership technique that can literally change people's attitudes and performance overnight. The secret of this technique is deceptively simple. Using *and* instead of *but* in a sentence changes the expression from a failure mode to a solution mode.

Replacing *but* with *and* is not a new idea. Dale Carnegie included the concept in his groundbreaking book *Howto Win Friends & Influence People*, written in 1936. While coaching employees, however, I have discovered this powerful idea is not widely used. When managers begin using this approach, coupled with a shift from concentrating on shortcomings to emphasizing what's done right, they report immediate success. I'll use a recent client experience to illustrate how this works.

"John" is a senior manager of a construction company, and he had a well-deserved reputation for publicly chewing employees out for mistakes or problems when he inspected a job site. Besides demoralizing workers, this behavior added to John's stress. At my suggestion, John tried a different approach. Instead of looking for problems on the job (which is the typical default mode for supervisors), John looked for things done well. All of his public comments as he walked about the job were positive or friendly. John still made a mental note of problem areas, but saved discussion of those for private sessions with the job superintendent. Moreover, when he discussed the shortcomings with the

superintendent, John did not belittle the other person. After trying this new approach, John reported to me that he was amazed at the improvements. Productivity improved and John's stress level declined. John's ear-to-ear smile as he related his experiences to me was convincing evidence of his commitment to the new management style.

I want to make clear that "John" is not a caricature or a Neanderthal manager. Far from it. John is smart, experienced, and uses well-established management practices for employee job performance feedback. For example, he used the

time-honored sandwich technique of inserting a criticism between two positive comments, like, “Joe, you do good work framing, but ...” However, at the word “but” Joe’s whole demeanor changes to a defensive posture, and defensive people are not receptive to new ideas. This is where using the magic conjunction *and* changes everything.

Let’s assume Joe does good work, but is too slow. Instead criticizing his low output, using *and* creates a problem-solving tone. “Joe, you do good work framing. In fact, your quality is among the best in the company, *and* I am confident that with a little more training your productivity will soon rise to a similar high level.” Put this way, there is no *but* to raise Joe’s defenses. Instead, the sentence flows naturally from Joe’s strength to a positive affirmation of expected improvement. A positive expectation (“We can do this!”) is also more inspiring, and motivates people to give their best. It also creates a subtle but powerful shift in the boss’ attitude.

As a thought exercise, recall some recent “good *but* problem” situations in your life, replace but with and, and then change the words following and so the sentence makes sense. You’ll discover “good *and* problem” doesn’t sound right. For example, “That’s a great idea, but I don’t have the time to pursue it” becomes something like, “That’s a great idea, and we need to find a way to free up some time to investigate it. Do you have any ideas that might help?”

Try replacing *but* with *and* in your thinking and communication, and judge the results. It can change your outlook on life.

Tom Wagner

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