

“The Observer Effect” and Your Leadership

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“While the cat’s away, the mouse will play.” I hate that cliché! The connotation is far too cynical. Yet people do behave differently when they are being watched compared to when they are not.

A client learned of some strained relationships on one of her teams. She decided to sit in on a team meeting to observe the discord for herself. The meeting went amazingly well, and she detected no conflict. She asked me, “How am I supposed to troubleshoot this problem when I can’t even detect it?”

That phenomenon is called “the observer effect.” Consultants and coaches are keenly aware that when we are present, we witness something at least slightly different from what would typically occur.

Suppose I want to sit in on a meeting so I can provide feedback to this leader on how she interacts with her team. Some of what I observe--in both the leader and in the team members--is likely going to be what they would consider “better” behavior than normal. Despite their desires to the contrary, some of it may also be “worse.”

Those are judgmental words. I use them because many individuals presume my role is to evaluate the nature and quality of the interactions. So, inhibitions kick in (or out!). Interactions are not likely to be as relaxed and informal or as harsh and sarcastic as they might be if no outsider was present.

Because of the reality of this dilemma, finding out what is “true” or “normal” for an individual or a group is exceedingly difficult. It’s not anyone’s fault. We humans are not able to keep it from happening.

The behavior change is typically not intentional. Even if you ask people in advance to be as normal as possible, some people become self-conscious and change their behaviors in even more obvious ways. They may blush, giggle, remain abnormally quiet, or explain themselves inordinately.

This phenomenon is just as real with the leaders I serve. When I have a coaching conversation with an individual, that person is serving as a “reporter,” a very different role from his or her normal “leader” functions. The person is now sharing observations of self interacting with others. I have to evaluate the accuracy of the perceptions and how he or she might be modifying descriptions to look good in the situation.

We all want to look good to others, and we want to avoid looking bad. Yes, we humans inadvertently slant our observations. It’s rarely conscious, yet it’s real. We find reasons to justify our behaviors.

Am I sharing all this so that you will work to be less self-promoting (or condemning) in our conversations? Well, that would be desirable, but that’s not the main purpose of this article.

I want you to be aware that “the observer effect” is alive and well when you are the observer! Though you are part of the scenery in your organization, you are not exempt from the difficulties I’ve described. When you ask about a situation that occurred involving him or her, that person is now in the role of “reporter,” telling you something that may be close to accurate or could be highly skewed, intentionally or not.

Therefore, you cannot afford to take action blindly based on what you are told. Further, it may be inappropriate to take action hastily on what you personally witness! The meaning you make of your observation may be quite different from the meaning the other individual ascribes to that situation.

Is there a way to minimize the negative effects of this phenomenon? Fortunately, there is. People need to know that you are “for them” and “with them.” That is, they need to sense that you think and operate more as a genuine ally than you do as their overseer and judge.

That’s not easy, because the traditional boss/subordinate stereotypes work against you. Your direct reports realize you have the power to influence their careers, so they cater to what they think you want.

First, be open and consistent about what’s important to you and what drives you. Share why you do what you do. Make sure that you genuinely want to serve your direct reports. Integrity is paramount; people have to see that your behaviors are consistent with your stated motivations.

Second, frequently ask your direct reports these two questions: “Why do you work?” and “Why do you work here?” Seek the answers behind the obvious, “For a paycheck.” Your team members could probably earn more money elsewhere. Help them understand what causes them to be there every day and to strive for excellence. Then, do everything you possibly can to support them and their commitment. Let them know you are “for” them!

For more about how your observations affect employee behavior, look on the internet for information on the “Hawthorne Effect” and the “Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle.”