

“Okay, Director--Where Do I Focus the Spotlight?”

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Imagine you are the director of a Broadway play or a Hollywood movie. To successfully convey your narrative, you must establish each scene's mood. Among the many tools available to you is lighting. When you want to bring attention to something in particular, you might use a spotlight. Imagine that you have an experienced stage hand working the spotlight, taking direction from you.

As the leader in your organization, you're the director of your portion of the business. At various times, you might focus everyone's attention on past history, the problems of current reality, or perhaps your vision for the future. You might focus on the direction the organization is headed, resources you need, or the outcome you'd like a particular project to achieve.

Let's think, though, about the Hollywood or Broadway artistic director. In a movie or a play, the spotlight is usually on one or more of the performers. The purpose of the spotlight is to bring the audience's attention to the appropriate person and to make that person shine!

Imagine that in your organization, the spotlight is hanging from the ceiling in your office. As your organization's "director," where have you been focusing the spotlight lately?

I see too many leaders repeatedly focusing the spotlight on themselves. Maybe you like to let your boss or those under your authority know how smart you are or how easily you handle stress. Maybe you like to publicly celebrate your successes.

Think about this. The purpose of the director is to make the story come alive through the performers. That's never accomplished by focusing the spotlight on the director! Sure, Academy Awards are given to directors. And the quality of the show is hugely a function of the skill and commitment of the director.

However, your job as the leader is to build the abilities and confidence of those under your authority so that your customers are well served. The imaginary spotlight in the sky is a tool you can use to strengthen and support the players in your organization.

It's one thing to tell an individual, "Hey, you're doing a great job out there!" It's much more meaningful to say, "Yesterday, when the line went down, you involved everyone in troubleshooting the situation. You generated a plan for allocating our resources, including making sure those individuals with the least experience were using the downtime to strengthen their knowledge of the equipment. Thank you for turning an unexpected problem into a learning opportunity for our newer folks!"

Is all that detail really necessary? Doesn't the individual already realize he did a great job? Sure, but it's gratifying to spend a few moments in the spotlight! By speaking explicitly, you let the individual know that you are deeply aware of the contribution. We all welcome recognition for a job well done, but knowing the boss is familiar with the specifics of the situation makes the compliment much more real.

Providing specific feedback is a terrific application of the imaginary spotlight. Your compliment validates the employee and encourages future similar engagement. Other employees learn of your favorable comments and try harder, perhaps thinking they might obtain some spotlight time in the future.

Everyone in your organization wants to fit in (that is, be accepted) and be recognized for his or her unique contributions. Your use of the imaginary spotlight can be a huge affirmer of the values you want to instill in your organization. Further, you can significantly influence the creativity and contribution volunteered by your team members in the future.

Be careful that you don't abuse the spotlight. Turning the spotlight on yourself makes others think you are insecure, or that you are trying to promote yourself. You're much better off to be known for exposing the successes of those you influence!

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