

## **“Reporter Talk” vs. “Observed Behavior”**

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Please join with me in considering “reporter talk” as contrasted with “observed behavior.” Though the concepts come from my experience as a coach, you may find value in being aware of how these terms apply in your world, especially if involved in interviewing or in dealing with a discipline problem.

“Reporter talk” is what you experience when someone shares news. Often it’s the first time you become aware of the information. Unfortunately, you learn only what the reporter chooses to share. Some potentially important content may be overlooked due to time constraints, the reporter doesn’t think you’d be interested, specialized knowledge is required for understanding, etc.

Exploratory inquiry may be appropriate, as some information may be left out intentionally while some of what is shared may be exaggerated. The reporter may even be manipulating the meaning, hoping you will accept the news as fact and take action on what he or she presents.

“Observed behavior” is activity and outcomes that you can see personally. It differs from “reporter talk” in that no one is telling you about the progress. You have firsthand awareness of its existence, and you potentially are even able to evaluate the quality of the activities and their outcomes.

“Reporter talk” is what you typically hear when you conduct an interview. You ask questions and the candidate tells you stories about his or her past accomplishments.

Few candidates give you a complete picture. Often the contextual circumstances, the specific actions they took, and the results obtained are not mentioned. It’s up to you, the interviewer, to conclude if the vignettes are authentic and accurate. We all recognize the human tendency to embellish our stories so that we look good. As you listen to “reporter talk,” be aware that it may not be the whole truth!

By the way, you do the same thing. Much of your work is unseen by your team members. For example, when you return from a meeting at corporate headquarters, your description of your activities contains only reporter talk. Your colleagues have no observed behavior to confirm what you claim occurred.

Your team members watch closely for consistency between what they observe and what they hear you say. Gaps between the two contribute to employees mistrusting their boss.

Another aspect of reporter talk that often causes problems is that the “reporter” applies meaning to the circumstances being shared. When two or more people observe the same behavior, they will typically communicate far different aspects of the event. Because of the reporter’s biased interpretation, you should be very careful taking action based solely on reporter talk.

Here’s an example. An individual comes to you and describes the inadequacy of a fellow team member’s performance. With every good intention to maintain high standards within your organization, you decide to confront that team member with the knowledge you now have.

That individual will potentially refute your allegation and challenge you regarding the source of your information. Now you are in the awkward position of having to choose between revealing or protecting your source. You realize you have taken action based only on hearsay evidence.

A simple, effective, yet admittedly time-consuming alternative is to increase your efforts to personally observe the individual’s behaviors. There is no prohibition on you monitoring the performance of your team members. Simply watch more often and for longer periods. Only after you have sufficient personal observations should you take whatever action you consider appropriate.

The purpose of this article is merely to raise your awareness of the difference between when you know personally of some action and when that behavior is simply being reported to you. Your response to “reporter talk” may be to increase the time and energy you spend seeking “observed behavior.”