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Leadership: How To Say It

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Considerable skill is required to successfully say to someone in a power position, "I want to do it my way instead of your way."

Yet this skill is often needed by leaders at every level--whether you're a three-star general communicating with a four-star general, a CEO with a board member or key investors, a vice president with your CEO, a teacher with your principal, or an account manager with your client.

History provides us with case studies about how to do this. One of the best involves a general - in this case, General William Tecumseh Sherman - saying "I want to do it my way" to another general, and his superior General U.S. Grant.

The background: During the Civil War, General Grant was under great pressure from President Lincoln and his Secretary of War to wrap up the campaign against Richmond. The siege had gone on long enough, and continuing casualties were sapping support for the war. Sherman, far away from these pressures in Georgia, had just completed his famous march to the sea, and had reached Savannah.

To gain overwhelming force against the foe in Richmond, Grant ordered Sherman to send his troops north on ships as soon as possible. Sherman, however, thought it best to capture the port city of Savannah before leaving, and then march his army north, destroying everything in his path. Capturing Savannah would be a huge psychological victory for the Union cause, and marching instead of going by sea might take longer, but would give him a chance to do extensive damage, a skill that Sherman and his army had perfected.

Sherman had also perfected his ability to communicate. When he learned of Grant's priorities, instead of saying No to his superior, or challenging him directly, Sherman agreed to proceed north. But he also provided Grant with information that he hoped would change his mind.

Marching north instead of putting 60,000 troops on ships would take two weeks longer than sailing - assuming that enough ships could be found. That could be a big problem, Sherman reminded his boss. Finding and using that many ships would be a big drain on Union resources, Sherman pointed out. (Years later in his Memoirs, Sherman wrote that he estimated it would have taken 'little less than a hundred steamers and sailing-vessels.") In today's language, Sherman provided his superior with a benefit statement for doing it his own way.

Now, here's Sherman's communication to Grant. Sherman stated that he had "initiated measures looking principally to coming to you with 50,000 or 60,000 infantry..." and then Sherman added, almost as a footnote: "and, incidentally, to take Savannah, if time will allow."

What happened?

Grant agreed with Sherman. Sherman proceeded to take Savannah, and in a grand gesture, offered Savannah to the President as a Christmas gift. Then, Sherman marched--instead of sailing--northward.

Sherman used a technique that I have long recommended to those I coach. If you communicate with someone in a superior position, begin by indicating that you are completely willing to comply with their expressed wishes.

Then as diplomatically as possible, ask if he/she would like to hear your thoughts about alternatives. Usually, you'll find that the medicine will go down easily if you begin by sincerely offering to cooperate--to obey an order. Expect resistance if you sound argumentative and insubordinate.

Think about it. If two of the most war-hardened generals in American history found it useful to communicate with respect and deference to one another, gentle persuasion can certainly be a useful approach for you.

About the author:

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