



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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# The Stepping Stone

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# Dear Stepping Stone: Blindsided by Employee

by John West Hadley

## *Dear Stepping Stone:*

I have an employee that has been in the same position for many years. I'm new to the area, and I find myself in a situation of understandable ignorance and having to ask this employee questions not only because his/her actions are not in agreement with the policy manual, but because I need to understand why he/she is doing some of those things.

When I attempt to get answers, the employee will run to my boss and claim that the way I'm speaking is offensive, thus creating two problems for me:

1. My boss's pacification of the employee is undermining my authority, by not sending the employee back to me and allowing us to work through the situation, and
2. Of equal if not more importance, letting the employee continue not to follow policy.

Therefore, I have an employee who can avoid correcting behavior and continues to bypass company policy by simply going over my head and claiming that I spoke in a demeaning or condescending way.

With that said, the first thing I want to do is take inventory of my management style. I need to ask myself, "Is there something to what my employee is saying?" If so, how can I change the way I ask questions and communicate so as to not create the perception that I'm speaking down to my employees?

I'm of the opinion that some of this involves perception, and you cannot always anticipate how another will perceive what is said, but one can decrease the possibility of a negative perception by changing the words, phrasing and/or tone of what is being said, particularly in situations where resolution is needed quickly.

Changing one's phraseology will take time, but I believe it's an investment worth making as it could

change not only how your employees respond, but how everyone around you responds. I'll use your suggestion of GROW<sup>1</sup>; I think it is sound advice.

Sincerely,

*Blindsided*

*Dear Blindsided:*

The last issue addressed ways to approach communications and how they are perceived.<sup>1</sup>

As for the issue between your employee and your boss, it seems like you need to find a way to create a stronger relationship with your boss as well. You might think about how you could sit down with your boss and talk about the situation. (You could even use the GROW model to try to work through the situation—there's no reason it has to be used only in a downward direction.)

One possible goal would be an agreement with the boss that the next time you need to have a discussion with your employee, all three of you will meet together. You will still deliver whatever you need to communicate to your employee, but now your boss will be a direct witness to how you discuss things, and your employee would no longer be able to go around you to put a separate spin on it with your boss.

Good luck!

PS: I've talked about communication issues and creating influence in past issues of my Career Tips newsletter. You might want to browse around—I have the table of contents and selected articles on my Web site at <http://www.JHACareers.com/Newsletter.htm>. If there's a particular back issue that seems relevant, let me know and I'll forward it to you. ●



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<sup>1</sup> See "Dear Stepping Stone: The GROW Model for Coaching" in the April 2009 issue of *The Stepping Stone*.