



TRANSCRIPT

Episode # 6: Let's Go! Moving Other People into Action

Today we're going to talk a little about how to move other people into action, so that we lessen the feeling that we're herding cats. That's a pretty helpful superpower to have in the work world, so I think this will be a valuable episode for you.

Our work lives are filled with unpredictability, aren't they? No matter how much we try to get things lined up and going in the right direction, we can always count on something else.... or someone else.... coming along and knocking things off course.

It doesn't matter who you are, an admin assistant, a CEO, or anyone in-between. We're always trying to productively manage that dynamic where the unexpected starts interfering with our ability to get things done.

Now we can't eliminate the unexpected, and by the way, we shouldn't want to. There are a lot of good things that can come from unpredictability, both for us and for our organizations.

However, we do want to be able to manage that unpredictability so that it doesn't screw everything up. And what's the number one reason why day-to-day things go wrong.... why they go off track?

It's because we just can't get those other people to do their jobs, darn it! Or that's what we're thinking, right?

It could be that we need our boss to provide approval for something. Or we've asked a peer to provide us with data needed for an important presentation. Or our direct reports are just not turning things around in a timely way.

And we're thinking things like: "Why the heck can't that person just get their job done!" or "Why do I always have to follow up and ride herd on people to make sure they do their jobs?"

I once had a client named Lisa--smart, infectious enthusiasm, a real ball of fire. Lisa had been recently hired into the company to turn around one of their divisions, to shake things up and get things re-energized and productive.

And when we started working together, she said, "It's like wading through mud here. I'm supposed to make things happen. But when I tell people what to do or

what I need, we spend a huge amount of time going back and forth vs simply getting things done.

“Either I don’t get something I need promptly. Or someone gets back to me promptly, but what they give me is not what I asked for. Or they get back to me promptly with what I asked for, but the quality isn’t good enough.”

Well, I had a lot of sympathy for that. We’ve all been there... often on a daily basis. The unpredictability of other people’s behavior just keeps on knocking us off course and keeps us from getting things done easily and in a timely manner.

So how do we solve this? What’s causing this exasperating unpredictability among our co-workers? You want to know what’s causing it?

Well, you. You’re causing it! I’m kind of joking here to get your attention. I’m not really blaming you, of course!

But.... I’m also making a very important point about problem solving. Feelings like exasperation or frustration are signals or clues about the dynamic that we’re in. Any time we’re feeling exasperated or frustrated with a situation, there’s usually something we can do make it better...if only we think more deeply about it.

We may not be able to come up with a 100% solution. But if you could take a frustrating problem and solve 50% of it or even 75% by changing something that you are doing, wouldn't you want to do that?

We can't always control other people, even if they're the cause of the problem. But we can control ourselves and figure out ways to improve our own work lives. If we're good problem-solvers and need to find answers, the best place to start is always with ourselves.

Now, I'm not recommending this out of humility, by the way. The reason why I always ask myself, "What can I do to solve this problem I have with this other person?" is not because I'm humble, I have to admit.

I ask that question because I know that changing what I'm doing is a heck of lot easier than changing other people. So that's where I start with, "Can the answer to this problem be found in something I'm doing?"

And it turns out that there is an answer to the problem of how to manage other people's unpredictability.

In fact, there's a magic 4-step formula that you can use to reduce at least 50% of the "wading through mud" feeling, and you often can reduce it by much more than 50%.

Not only is that great news for you personally, but it's great news for the atmosphere and culture of your workplace. Because if you use this formula consistently, you start changing everything around you. Over time, your workplace will start feeling different in a very good way.

I'll explain that more towards the end of this episode, so stay with me to learn more about how your workplace will start shifting. It's a very cool thing to do.

But first let me walk you through the formula so you know how to do it. It's a formula that you use over and over again to move other people into action and increase the likelihood that they will do what you need them to do, in the way that you want them to do it, and by the time you want them to do it.

By the way, if you're driving or you're some place where you can't take notes, no worries. I've got you covered! We provide downloadable transcripts for all the episodes of this podcast, so a written copy of this formula is available to you.

So here we go.... this is the 4-step formula for making it more likely that people do the job you want them to.

Step #1: Start with the outcome you want, not the action you want them to take.

Most of the time when we want someone to do something, we tell them what action to take. Seems pretty logical, doesn't it? If we want them to write a report, we tell them to write a report. If we want our boss to approve adding a new position on our team, we ask her to approve that position. What could be clearer?

But the way the human brain works is that when someone tells us to do an action, we immediately guess why they want us to do that action and human beings are notoriously bad guessers.

So, when you ask someone to write an analysis on a competitor, if you haven't told them that it's required to make a smart decision on a possible acquisition, they might just regard it as an ordinary report. They might take their time with it. Or they might just provide information that will be helpful in how to compete with that company vs helpful in an acquisition scenario.

Now you might say, “Well, Kathy...of course I’m going to tell them why I need it. I just explain that later in the conversation.” And of course, that’s what many of us... or at least we think we do it. But if someone was taping the conversation, we’d be amazed at how unclear the message actually sounds.

On the other hand, imagine starting things off by saying to your colleague, “We’re planning to have a discussion at the next management team as to whether or not X company is possible fit with our long-term strategic objectives. It’s important that the discussion is well-informed because we’ll probably decide at that meeting whether we move forward into more serious talks. In order to do that, I need you to write an analysis of X company.”

When you spell the larger context like that at the very beginning of the conversation, you’ve caught the other person’s attention and helped them to understand what is at stake. They are less likely to have heard “I need you to do something, blah, blah, blah.”

Instead, they’ve heard “we need to accomplish something, and this is the part you need to do.” They have greater understanding of the ultimate goal and what their role is in it, and so they’re less likely to perform the task in a way that’s inconsistent with that.

Step #2: Spell out how the task needs to be done.

If there's one aspect of asking people to do things where all of us can get better, it's helping the other person understand how to get the task done. Why do we drop the ball on this?

I'm guessing there are several reasons. Sometimes we're too rushed for time to carefully think through how the task needs to get done.

Other times, we're worried that the other person will feel condescended to or perceive us as a micromanager if we describe how the task should be done. And when we avoid providing details, we rationalize this to ourselves by saying there's no need to spell things out because of course the other person "gets" how things should be done.

But the reality is that it's negligent and even inconsiderate not to provide the other person with relevant information as to how to get the task done. No one wants to waste their time. You don't want your time to be wasted and other people don't want their time being wasted.

So, the single biggest way of avoiding wasted time is to give the other person clarity about the important components of the task. Now again, I'm not talking about micromanaging the task. I'm merely emphasizing how important it is to provide clear guidelines if they're mission critical.

What are some examples of things other people need to know in order to do a task well?

- Well, obviously timeframe and deadlines are often relevant.
- Who needs to be involved or consulted with, is often another.
- An important guideline that we often omit is what priority this task has compared with other work that's being done.
- What kind of follow-up and check-ins are advisable, might be another guideline.
- And finally think about whether the person needs some guidance as to their behavior or attitude as they do the task.

What do I mean by that? Well, an obvious example is when there are organizational politics and personalities involved. You want to be sure that the person is able to navigate that well.

So, if there's anything important they need to know about the key personalities, their likes and dislikes, how they need to be treated, then you want to provide that information upfront.

Does it take a little time to think about the important aspects of how to get the job done? Well, of course it does. But it's only a little time and it can save you an enormous amount of time later on. And the more you do it, the more it will become second nature to you.

Remember my client Lisa who was a ball of fire? She originally complained that at her new company getting people to do things well and in a timely manner was like "wading through mud."

But she was incredibly pleased by the change when she started to spell out to people how things should be done. She said, "Oh, now I get it! In order to make things go fast, you actually need to slow down a little at the beginning."

So on to step #3. Now this one is an inside secret that you may never have heard before. But it's a really powerful part of the formula.

Step #3: Make a promise.

All the research pretty convincingly shows that people are more motivated to do a task if they feel like they're reciprocating for something you are doing.

A promise is your way of essentially saying that if they do the task, something good will happen for them. Sometimes the promise can be something that will directly benefit them.

Typical examples of this include the promise of:

- Providing some additional support and resources to the person
- Your personal help in getting something done that they need
- Or even your willingness to help eliminate a workplace problem that is currently bothering them.

But more often, the promise is merely articulating how life in general will be better for them if they perform the task.

- You promise to them that the task is a meaningful one with a lot of value.
- Or that it gives them a chance to be publicly seen in a positive light.
- Or that it could be helpful to their long-term career ambitions
- Or you emphasize simply how pleased and grateful you or others will be when they perform the task.

All of these promises, both the specific ones and the more general ones do the same thing. They connect the person you're talking to with a positive future and gives them additional motivation for doing the work and doing it well.

So, the inside secret here is that promises are a highly persuasive and powerful way to move someone into action.

OK, and finally, Step #4? Get a proper response from the person.

What do I mean by that? Well, here's what we normally do.

We say, "I'd like you to do this task." And the other person says...wait for it... "OK." Or else they say some other version of OK, like "Got it." Or, if it's your boss he'll say, "I'll definitely consider it."

And we walk away assuming that we're all on the same page and the job is getting done. I hate to tell you, but that assumption is often wrong. And if you think about it, you know that it's wrong too.

How often has someone asked you to do a task where you said OK and then got sidetracked? What you really were saying was “OK, but only if something else doesn’t happen.”

If you had actually said that out loud, then the other person could have said, “Well, let’s talk about what needs to be done if something else happens.” Or they even could have said, “I see what you’re saying. Maybe I should ask someone else to do this task.”

OK is never a sufficient answer when you’re asking someone to do something and you need confirmation that it will be done.

Let me repeat that.

OK is never a sufficient answer when you’re asking someone to do something and you need confirmation that it will be done.

Without a proper answer to your request, you lose the ability to (1) to ascertain if the person understands what they need to do and is aligned with you and (2) to hold them accountable if they don’t handle your request in accordance with your expectations.

So, what is a proper answer? Well, there are several types.

The first one is acceptance. Acceptance is where you get explicit acknowledgement and agreement on the who, what, when and where of the task. That's the answer we're all hoping to get.

But another proper answer might be that the other person declines to do the task. That's kind of surprising, isn't it? But declining is a helpful answer because you know where you stand. You can figure out what to do now vs later when things would be more complicated. You're not wasting time.

And when someone declines to do a task, you still might be able to convince them. You can explore their reasons for declining and see whether there are options that will allow you to get an acceptance from them, like offering them to get more help in doing the task.

Here's another proper answer: a counteroffer. A counteroffer is when the other person says, "I can't do exactly what you're asking, but I can do this other thing that might be helpful."

That's a great answer because now you can explore and negotiate. That other thing might be good enough for you. Or you could have that person do one part of the task and approach someone else to do the other part.

Here's another answer you might get: a promise to reply to you later. As you might suspect, that's not the most desirable answer to hear—it's pretty open-ended.

But you can turn it into a much better answer with one simple action.... get agreement on what timeframe is mutually acceptable for when that person will get back to you. If that person says, "I'll get back to you with my answer in a week." or "I'll get back to you after the board meeting," you now have something to work with. You can plan your next steps, without being left up in the air.

Finally, going back to the typical response, what do you do if you don't get a proper answer, and instead the other person does the normal thing and says some version of OK?

In that case, it's perfectly OK and acceptable to ask, "Does that mean you'll do it?" Be polite, but also be persistent in pinning the person down to a proper

answer. Remember, getting things nailed down in the beginning is the key to having things go smoothly and timely in the end.

So, there you have it, the magic formula for getting other people to do a task in a way that matches up with your expectations.

- First, start with the outcome you want before you tell them the task you need them to do.
- Next, spell out how you want the person to do the task. Let them know the important things they need to know in order to do the task successfully.
- Next, get that person motivated. Make a promise that connects them with a positive future.
- And finally, get a proper answer from the person. Don't be satisfied just with "OK." Keep on going until you have an acceptance, a decline or rejection, a counteroffer, or an agreement on when you can expect a proper response.

OK, now remember that this 4-step formula is captured in the transcript to this episode, so be sure to download that if you need a hard copy for your files.

But before we finish up here, let's talk about one more thing, and that is what the very big benefits will be to you if you follow this magic formula.

I guarantee you if you follow this formula consistently when you ask other people to do things, here is what you're going to see.

First of all, more stuff gets done and you don't have to work as hard to make sure it's getting done. What does that mean? You're not wasting a lot of time—in fact, you have more time for your own things. Not a bad outcome, right?

But secondly, things start to change around you because stuff is getting done faster. When the people around you are getting things done faster, it creates energy and momentum for the entire team. And that's something that can scale up beyond your team.

Teams and companies that get things done faster have an advantage in the work world. They generally have higher levels of employee motivation and the ability to perform better than their competitors. So there really is value to the magic formula besides just making your own work life better.

This is something I have a passion for---- dialing down the unpredictability and frustration we often have in our work lives and dialing up the efficiency and morale by using simple techniques and formulas.

It won't solve every workplace issue, but remember what I said before.....wouldn't we be really happy with a workplace that was even just 50% better? That's a perfectly achievable goal if you just tweak some of the ways in which you do things.

OK, my friends, here's to a good rest of the week, and I look forward to seeing you in our next episode!

We're celebrating the launch of the podcast here, and I'd like to include you.

I'm going to be giving away AirPods Pro to five lucky listeners who follow, rate, and review the show. Now, of course, you don't have to give the show five stars, although that would be awesome and I do hope you love what you've heard so far. But I'd also love your honest opinion and feedback as well as your questions so I can create a show that's a valuable resource for you.

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