

Is There Really a Generation Gap?

Recently, one of my senior executive clients described a problem he was having with one of his twenty-something employees.

“Greg misses deadlines and only carries out part of his responsibilities in managing the project. He listens to the suggestions I provide – then does something entirely different. He doesn’t follow-through on the details and seems surprised when deadlines are close to not being met by the employees he is overseeing in other parts of the company. I have had several performance discussions with him – even developed an improvement plan, but he seems oblivious to the most basic project management requirements.

I think there are generational differences in how we view his responsibilities. He is a good employee with a great background. What can I do to help Greg really dig into the job?”

In my role as an executive coach, my clients typically discuss problems with their boss, their peers or their team. It is not my mission to manage their organization for them but to offer an opportunity away from the challenges of their work environment for them to clarify the issues, to gain some objectivity and to begin to outline a plan of action.

My challenge is not to rush the conversation to develop solutions, but to ask the questions that will help the client regain clarity and focus on the real problem.

I asked him a series of questions:

If you held a gun to his head, could he carry out all of the responsibilities of his position? In other words, does he have the requisite skills, competencies and abilities to do the job to your exacting standards?

My client responded: “Yes, I believe he has the skills to do the job.”

Why do you think he doesn’t perform the complete job including follow-up and follow-through?

My client responded: “It is easier and less time-consuming to do the job as he sees fit without the follow-through I require. He gets the major duties completed and feels it is not his job to manage others in supporting departments.”

What are the consequences to him for not performing the complete job?

My client responded: “Well, thus far, there are no consequences because I normally oversee the parts I know he is going to miss and I really micro manage the project so that it is completed on time.”

So, each time you give him a project to manage, what do you think are his (learned) expectations concerning your involvement?

My client responded: “Well, I guess he expects a little grief from me and then he knows I will handle things.”

Given the scenario you described – what is he likely to continue to do in the future when you give him a new project?

My client responded: “I guess he will continue to do the job the way he has always done.”

So what do you think are some options that will assist you in addressing this problem?

At that point we discussed a strategy for coaching Greg to do the whole job, every time. We also discussed the need for specific action items including communicating expectations, timetables, consequences and feedback.

If I had immediately jumped to providing suggestions designed to help him solve the problem, he would not have been able to identify **his** contributions to maintaining the status quo for this employee.

A good coach helps clients develop alternatives, options and solutions to address organizational problems. A great coach helps clients identify their internal drivers and how these drivers might contribute to team member performance issues.

The question facing corporate leaders and executive coaches – **is a communications gap masquerading as a generation gap?**

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Christine M. Glasco consults to company executives, business owners and non-profit leaders on strategic leadership and career management/career transformation solutions. For a complimentary copy of *Five Tips to Transform Your Executive Career* to help you be more effective in your career, go to www.christineglasco.com
Email: info@CGconsultinggroup.net Phone: 1.940.367.0837