When You’re in Charge, Your Whisper May Feel Like a Shout

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Preoccupations

By ADAM GALINSKY

“Gail, I need to talk with you about something this afternoon. Can you come by my office at 3 p.m.?“ I didn’t think much about my seemingly innocuous words, spoken to one of my department’s doctoral students one morning back when I was an assistant professor.

Gail showed up right on time, walking into my office with great trepidation. I proceeded to go over some small changes in a research project we were planning. After I finished talking, Gail sternly said, “Never do that to me again!”

“Do what?” I said with much confusion.

“Scare the hell out of me by saying you needed to talk to me,” she said. “I spent the whole day obsessing about whether I was in trouble.”

Initially, I thought that Gail must be particularly oversensitive. But not long after that, the chairwoman of my department, a full professor who would one day vote on my tenure case, asked me to come and see her later in the day. For the next five hours, I was consumed with fear that I had done something wrong — until we met and I learned that the topic was also insignificant.

At the time of these exchanges, I had started to study the psychological effects of
power. These experiences brought me face to face with how the words of those with power loom large over those with less power. This is a phenomenon I call the power amplification effect.

The problem is that the powerful are often oblivious to their impact. Holding power, as my research shows, reduces one’s capacity to appreciate how one’s words and gestures may affect others. As I studied power and reflected on my own experiences, I realized that three types of communications become amplified by power: direct communication, silence and ambiguity.

**Direct communication.** When I was a first-year doctoral student, I shared an idea in class on the very first day. The professor dismissed my comment. “That is completely wrong,” he said, violently shaking his head. I was mortified.

A few weeks later I ran into the same professor as I was walking down the hall. He stopped me with a smile and said he had enjoyed reading one of my papers. “You are a lovely writer,” he said. I continued on my way but now with a skip in my step.

This example illustrates how feedback from the powerful — whether positive or negative — easily becomes amplified.

**Silence.** Consider the deafening silence that my brother, Michael, experienced on a flight from Colorado to Montana a few years ago. Without warning, his plane dropped nearly 1,000 feet in 12 seconds. A flight attendant hit her head so forcefully on the ceiling that she was knocked unconscious. An infant flew back two rows but was, thankfully, uninjured.

Despite this unexpected free fall, no one in the cockpit ever addressed the passengers. My brother was terrified and desperately wanted communication, any communication, from those in charge. He wondered if the pilot had been injured or if the plane had been damaged. Without any communication from the cockpit, he felt unsafe.

Similarly, when a corporation experiences turbulent times, and its leaders respond with silence, employees’ fears run rampant with worst-case thoughts.

**Ambiguity.** Let’s return to my comment to Gail and my chairwoman’s
comment to me: “I need to talk to you later.” That statement is filled with ambiguity. The topic could be either trivial or important. Nothing in the statement offered any clue as to why I wanted to speak to Gail or why my chairwoman wanted to speak with me. Because the powerful have the capacity to punish others, seemingly straightforward requests can incite unchecked worry.

These amplifications can be managed with a little perspective taking. When in power, we need to be more conscious of how direct communication, silence and ambiguity can affect others. During my brother’s flight, if the pilots had considered the perspective of their passengers, they would have realized that even a short message would have been extremely reassuring.

And once you realize how the phrase “I need to talk to you” can create worry and concern, you can always add a little more communication.

When I need to talk to someone with less power than I have, I try to remind myself to identify the topic. Or if it is too complicated to explain, at least I try to allay the person’s fears by saying something like “I need to see you later today. But don’t worry; it’s nothing bad.”

Sometimes the amplification effect can be positive. Take gratitude. As we saw with my former professor, expressions of gratitude and praise are particularly resonant when expressed by those with power. Yet my research with Eric Anicich and Alice Lee shows that the powerful express less gratitude and less praise than those with less power.

If we take a moment to think about the power differentials in our interactions and how our words might affect others, we can communicate more effectively. And we can cause unnecessary worries and fears to float away.

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