Forewarned Is Forearmed

Give your staff a user's manual—to you

By Ben Dattner

Your iPhone has one. So should you. If you're a boss beginning a new job, providing detailed instructions to your new staff about how you operate can help prevent communication breakdowns and misunderstandings. In your "Managerial User's Manual," which you write for yourself and then share verbally with your new team, you can describe your preferences, your style, what makes you apoplectic, and what people may not understand about you. After all, most bosses would claim, "Hey, I'm not toxic, just misunderstood."

A user's manual provides the foundation for constructive conversations about your motivations, work style, management and delegation style, communication and feedback style, learning and decision-making style, values, personal style, and any other information that can help reduce misunderstandings, accelerate mutual understanding and facilitate better collaboration with your new team. (See below for an example)

The benefit of a user's manual is that it serves as a starting point for accelerating the "getting to know you" process. Writing a User's Manual greatly diminishes the possibility that misunderstandings will cause your new team to view you as a "toxic" boss. (It can also defuse tensions between longtime leaders and their staffers).The content of a user's manual should include what one values, what one is motivated by, and areas for potential miscommunications. In a sense, any interaction between a new leader and his or her team can be thought of as a cross-cultural communication. After all, the new leader comes from another organizational culture, and possibly also a different national culture as well.

For example, a client of mine wrote a user's manual in which he let his team know that just because he asks many questions, it doesn't mean that he is skeptical about their capabilities. It's simply his modus operandi. Originally a New Yorker, and now a company president in Mexico, my client was mindful that his new team might misinterpret his candid style as confrontational. A British HR Director working in New York City told her staff that they shouldn't interpret her reserved demeanor as being distant or unfriendly.

In order to create a User's Manual, you can review past performance reviews and/or 360 degree feedback, consult trusted current or past colleagues, mentors or coaches for input, or take assessment tests such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) or the Hogan Personality Inventory.

By writing a "user's manual" in which one conveys valuable information about oneself, the risk that negative interactions will occur can be greatly reduced. For example, another client wrote in his user's manual that he was a morning person, and he requested that his new team approach him with issues in the morning rather than in the afternoon. If he had not conveyed that preference, his staff might have approached him in the afternoon and concluded that he did not really want to interact. Or that he didn't care about the issues that they were trying to bring to his attention. In other words, they might have perceived his afternoon disengagement as being due to toxic disinterest instead of circadian rhythms.

With many people in career transition these days due to the challenging economy, writing a user's manual can be a good use of time, not just because when one finds one's next job the user's manual can be a useful tool, but also because even in the interviewing process, taking time to reflect on one's style and preferences can make it easier to prepare for interviews in which prospective employers may assess self awareness and potential leadership skills. Whenever I interview job candidates on behalf of clients, I ask them what wisdom they would share with their prospective new staff.

Writing a user's manual not only accelerates the getting-to-know one other process, it also sets a positive precedent for open dialogue and a framework for ongoing clear and candid communication with your new staff. A user's manual should provide explanations and suggestions, not rationalizations or justifications, should be a supplement to candid and open conversations, not a substitute for them, and should prevent the kinds of misunderstandings that can lead a new leader to be viewed as toxic.

A user's manual should be an evolving, living document; managers and executives should solicit ongoing feedback from staff and colleagues about how accurate and useful their user's manual is, and should update it as they progress in their careers. Leaders should also endeavor to build on their strengths and remedy their development areas on an ongoing basis, so that both their user interface and their operating system improve over time. Used intelligently, a user's manual can be an invaluable antidote against toxicity.

A SAMPLE USER'S MANUAL:

MY STYLE:

When I'm under pressure, I get serious. This doesn't mean I'm angry or dissatisfied. Also, be ready to answer the question "why" five times for any given issue. If I ask a lot of questions, please don't become worried or defensive

VALUES:

I value loyalty to our company's values above all else. And it is very important to me that everyone in this organization treats everyone—from me to the janitor—with equal respect and dignity.

COMMUNICATING WITH ME:

Have conviction for your point of view. I respect people who have the courage to push back if they think I'm wrong. But don't present until you are prepared. And make sure you have solutions.

FEEDBACK:

I don't give much positive feedback. Assume I'm satisfied with your work unless I tell you otherwise.

HOW TO HELP ME:

I have a tendency to do things myself instead of delegating, so please suggest things you can take off of my plate.