

The Question You Need to Ask to Focus and engage Your Team

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Gary Burnison, the CEO of recruiting and leadership development firm Korn-Ferry writes a weekly email every week which I subscribe to. Not surprisingly, a lot of his notes the past several months has focused on leading during the pandemic. This past week, Gary offered a pointed metaphor to describe where he thinks we collectively are in the process.

He wrote that we are not in a sprint or even a marathon to the next normal; we are in an IronMan® Triathlon and we are about halfway through the opening two-mile open water swim. If Burnison is right, we still have a 26.2-mile marathon and a 112-mile bike ride to go after we get out of the water.

Even if we get to skip the bike ride, it is increasingly clear that we have a long way to go on this. So, what do you do as a leader to keep yourself and your people focused and engaged on the results that are most important for all of you to achieve? I've been talking with a lot of coaching and leadership development program clients about that lately and have landed on a question that has been helpful to everyone I've asked it of – “How do you want your team to feel?”

The context for that question comes from a model I learned years ago from a friend and colleague named Alexander Caillet. It is called the Thinking Path and my very simplistic version of it looks like this:



I will explain it to you from right to left. The R stands for Results. That, after all, is what pretty much every team is charged with getting. So that leads to the question, where do Results come from? The answer is they come from the A – Actions. So, that prompts another question, where do Actions come from? Well, they start with a Thought or a set of thoughts. That is what the T on the far left stands for. To use a COVID example, a Thought might be, “We’re going to have to completely reinvent the way we do business to get results this year.” Logical, rational thoughts are vital to getting results but if you stop with that, you are

probably not going to get the results you are hoping for. That's because the Actions of your team (or yourself, or your kids or your partner for that matter) don't flow directly from a Thought. In between the Thought and the Action is the F – the Feeling or emotional state.

That emotional state has a huge and predictable effect on the Action and, therefore, on the Result.

In my experience, most corporate cultures over index on the Thought and under index on the Feeling. And, because they do not give as much attention to the Feeling as they should, they get sup-optimal Actions and sub-standard Results. So, how do you want your people to feel? I will share a couple of real-life examples.

In a conversation a few weeks ago with a group of regional sales directors, we were talking about all of the challenges they are facing as many of their customers are working from home or limiting access to their offices. Their salespeople need to come up with some fresh and creative actions to stay connected to their customers. How do they need to feel to do that? That is the question I asked the sales directors. They gave it some thought and came up with words like purposeful, convicted, inspired and positively influential. In a separate conversation with a vice president of sales, I asked him how he needs his regional sales directors to be feeling to lead their people effectively during the pandemic. His answers included words like positive, committed, and passionate.

You can probably see the leadership implications of all of this pretty quickly and clearly. The brilliance and quality of your thought and plans really will not amount to much unless you are attending to the way your people feel. It comes back to one of my favorite rules of leadership and that is that it's a two-part job – the first is to define reality (the thinking) and the second is to offer hope (the feeling). You have to help people find the hope that follows the reality. I am not suggesting that you give them a load of ungrounded happy talk. I am suggesting that you need to help them tap into the feeling of optimism and empowerment that comes from thinking through the full range of their options and the impact they can make through using innovative and creative approaches. Think about the difference in the Actions and Results that would flow from Feelings like that as opposed to the ones that would naturally flow from Feelings like helplessness, despair, or disengagement.

The differences are clear, and they don't just apply to your team, they apply to you. How do you need to feel to take the actions that lead to the results you need to deliver for your team, your family, your friends, and other stakeholders? Just asking the question can help you tune into any adjustments you may need to make in your thinking. Ask the question this week and see what it does to shape the actions of yourself and your team.