

# Being Clear and Direct: Two Secrets to Managing and Leading Effectively

By Jessika M. Ferm

Being clear and direct seem like easy concepts but as one of my mentors said, “just because something isn’t complicated doesn’t mean it’s easy.” Most managers and leaders could use some help in the “clarity and directness department” in order to avoid the pains of miscommunications, delegation mishaps, and conflicts that are often caused by assumptions and misunderstandings. These four steps will help you review your “clarity and directness quotients” and provide strategies for developing your management and leadership skills.

## Step 1. Conduct a Clarity Audit and Challenge Your Results

The first step in the process is to check in on how clear you think you are. On a piece of paper, draw a horizontal line marking 1 at the start and 10 at the end and putting “not at all” over the 1 and “extremely” over the 10. Now rate yourself on the key tasks you spend a significant amount of time on at work. Examples may include delegating, strategic planning, communicating the big picture or addressing people issues. Once you have your list of key areas, begin rating yourself on the clarity scale. Ask yourself, “When I delegate, how clear am I about what I expect the results to be?” “When I address people issues, do I clearly state the issue or do I avoid the sensitive underlying challenges?” “When I share the big picture to my team, how clearly do I communicate the time lines involved or the tasks needed to be completed to reach it?” These challenging questions will help you get honest about your scores.

## Step 2. Review Your Clarity Audit and Design an Action Plan

Step two is to take a look at your list. If you scored yourself a ten on any item, consider asking a team member or your boss to verify your rank-

ing. Very few managers and leaders are extremely clear about what they want, expect, or desire and can maintain a perfect ranking. If you are positive that the score is accurate, good for you! The next challenge may be to teach others the techniques you are using to get outstanding results.

For any score nine and below, list one action step you can take to move it higher. For example, it may be that you are clear about the tasks you delegate, but forget to set measurable deadlines. Or it may be that you clearly communicate the big picture vision, but fail to outline the first action step your team members need to take in order to move the vision forward. For each score, commit to one small action step that you will take to increase your clarity score this month. Challenge yourself each day to become clearer by adding, changing, or modifying how and what you communicate.

## Step 3. Conduct a Directness Audit and Review Your Most Challenging Areas

Now it’s time to see how direct you are. Repeat the process you did in step one. Create the scale, list three or four key areas and rank yourself once more. The only difference here is that the scale answers how effective you are at being direct vs. clear. For number 1, state “not effective” and for 10, “extremely effective.” The challenge most managers and leaders have with increasing their directness is that they are afraid to become overly aggressive, dominant, blunt, or tactless and hence lose their effectiveness. These fears are valid. Being direct and doing so effectively take some work. Depending on your personality and style, you may be more or less direct naturally.

The key to becoming more direct is

noticing areas where you aren’t effectively direct right now. For example, if you are naturally indirect, you may gravitate towards giving vague instructions which may lead to miscommunications, mishaps, or excuses. If you are overly direct or prescriptive, you may take away the motivation from others by coming across as dictatorial. For this step, simply indicate your score and reflect on the areas you find most challenging.

## Step 4. Develop a Directness Action Plan

Once you have identified opportunities to be more direct, map out an action plan to practice. For example, if you scored yourself lower on being direct when addressing performance issues, practice identifying the core of the issue right up front next time you have to meet with a trouble performer. If a person consistently makes excuses for not getting things done on time, simply state, “The last three times I asked you to deliver a specific result at an agreed upon time, you didn’t follow through,” instead of asking the person questions about the situation. When you use facts to support your statements, it is easier to be direct.

For each of your key areas, list a strategy you will use to improve your management or leadership skills. If you are just getting warmed up to being more direct, try using the directness strategies for positive situations. For example, offer someone direct and unsolicited positive feedback to something they did or a result they delivered. If your tendency is to be too direct, bordering on being blunt, practice starting a conversation with a question. Avoid “why” questions and focus on sentences that begin with “what,” “how,” “when,” or “where” to avoid leading the



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Columbus, Ohio 43212

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conversation. The question, "How can I help you be more effective?" is a great option instead of saying, "Here is what you are doing wrong."

When we increase our clarity and directness as managers and leaders we eliminate unnecessary confusion, frustrations, and stress. It may take a while to fine-tune and balance these skills, but the more you practice them the more effective you will be.

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*Jessika M. Ferm is the President of J.Ferm, LLC, an international leadership consulting firm and is the trusted adviser to leaders and managers ranging from Fortune 100 companies to start ups. She can be reached at (614) 441-8972 or [jessika@jferm.com](mailto:jessika@jferm.com).*

