1 Thinking and Discussing in Outcomes versus Activities

There's a great story I like to tell that highlights the power of encouraging your people to take an outcomes-over-activities mind-set to their work. Many years ago, General W. L. "Bill" Creech took over the Tactical Air Command (TAC) in the US Air Force, which, at that time, was a team of more than 100,000 people across the world. Their job was to repair and maintain the airplanes.

When General Creech took over, the team was organized by function and computer notifications directed workers to aircraft in need of repair and maintenance. Believing in the power of team-work, he reorganized the entire staff into teams and assigned these newly formed small teams specific airplanes to maintain. The teams focused on keeping their planes flying and shared best practices with one another. The result was that *all* the teams' performance increased dramatically. After the team restructuring was completed, General Creech visited his teams throughout the world and asked his staff how they liked this new way of working. On one occasion, a team member replied with a question back to the general:

"When is the last time you washed a rental car?"

That may sound like a strange response, but it indicated that the teams were now taking real ownership for ensuring the planes were safely flying—they were owning the outcome, a stark difference from their attitude before the restructuring. Before the restructuring they were focused on their own individual activities and not on the out-come—the plane safely flying.

Before: The teams were *activity*-focused, focused on whatever their individual tasks were for that day.

Now: The teams are *outcome*-focused, asking the overarching question, is the plane flying?

Being outcomes-focused, versus activity-focused, makes a huge difference. When staff focus on the activities, their focus is on staying busy. There is no force driving them to do anything differently than they did the day before. But when staff are focused on *outcomes*, their focus is on achievement—and with an achievement focus, they are motivated to look for better ways to reach the achievement faster.

It's no surprise then that successful leaders think and communicate using the *language of achievement.* They bring an outcomes mind-set to everything they do and focus on instilling that mind-set in their people, too.

Here are a couple of comparisons between the language of achievement versus the language of activity:

Language of Achievement	Language of Activity
Talk in . . .	*Talk in . . .*
Outputs	Inputs
Deliverables	Tasks
Decisions	Discussions
Milestones	To-do lists

A leader of a global virtual team noticed the power of the language of achievement with her team. She began every conversation she had with her team, both one on one and as a group, with the outcome that needed to be achieved and the date it was needed by. Then they discussed how they would tackle the activities and meet the

milestones. They always finished the conversation by reconfirming the outcome and key dates. She found that by always bookending the conversation, starting and ending with what needed to be achieved—the outcome—she was constantly reinforcing the achievement in her team member's minds.

Ownership for Achievement (Outcomes)

The general's team member comment about rental cars indicated that the teams now took ownership for the outcome (the plane flying), and they helped their fellow team members fix the plane faster. After all, if the plane had five problems and only four have been fixed, it's still not flying! With a focus on the outcome, the team members pitched in to help one another efficiently fix problems as they arose. In fact, they painted their team names on the side of the airplanes, which signaled real ownership.

> *Outcomes* **drive ownership, and ownership drives commitment**.

The general did two things that are absolutely crucial for a successful team, especially when you are leading across distances and cultures:

1. *He injected positive competition (peer pressure) into the group.* He made team performance visible to everyone and fueled competition among the teams by tracking which teams could repair the planes the fastest and with the best quality. He had a strong quality and performance focus and instilled that focus in everyone in the teams. The importance of this positive competition and peer pressure is discussed further in Chapter 11. But suffice it to say, every successful team has some element of competition within it.

2. *He had teams share best practices (continuous improvement).* The general drove the teams to share their best practices with the

other teams so that the good things people were doing could be replicated across the entire organization. This best practice sharing drove better overall quality, performance, and pride throughout.

The general knew the importance of posing and answering the question, *Would you rather your people own or rent their jobs?* You'll see a big difference in their behavior depending on which of these they choose. There's also big difference based on whether people own what they are *doing* or own what you ask them to *achieve*.

Would you rather your people own an activity or own an outcome? This is another crucial distinction. When your people own only the activities and you discuss only these with them, you are speaking in the language of busyness. When you can compel them to own, and therefore talk about, outcomes, everyone is speaking the language of achievement.

That doesn't mean activities are never discussed. But smart managers always frame these activities' discussions with what needs to be achieved—the outcomes that those activities create.

Outcomes Are Both Visible *Results* and Visible *Experiences*

Consider the example of the teams repairing airplanes; the obvious visible result is the successful flying of the planes. But the visible experience or experiences might be the way the team interacts with the pilot. This is important in two particular situations: the team wants to *get the right information* from the pilot to fix any problems with the plane, and the team *wants the pilot to be confident* that the plane is in top working order and that all problems have been fixed.

The same applies to *your* team. You have both visible results you are focusing on achieving and targets for the *experiences* you

want others to have (to feel) in achieving those results. You have both internal experiences (team experiences) and external experiences (for example, those involving customers, vendors, and partners).

Think about the experiences in your own life, such as flying somewhere. The result for you is getting from point A to point B. Your experience, on the other hand, is determined by the effectiveness of the service and how the airline personnel treat you—the things that affect how you *feel* about that airline. An experience creates a strong impact, because it is the feeling that stays with you long after you have forgotten the details of the flight.

A customer services group has both visible results and experiences. It must successfully process all customer orders while also successfully resolving every customer problem. From the customers' perspective, their experiences—their interaction with the customer service representative and how it made them think about the representative and the company—is what they will remember. To be successful, it is key that customer service representatives focus on the experience as well as the result.

So ask yourself, and ask your team: *What are the most important experiences that we deliver?* Sometimes, the outcomes that drive the largest influence with others are the visible experiences, because the successful outcome is always engaging people's feelings. Sometimes, however, the most important things aren't visible.

A Clear Direction and Pace

Successful leaders are focused on *direction and pace*. They know clearly where they want to take the team (the direction or goals) and want to get there as fast as they can (the pace). These leaders create a sense of urgency that drives the pace their people's work. Direction and pace

are the most important criteria they use to decide whether to say yes or no to new initiatives or projects.

Successful leaders ask themselves, "Is this taking us in the right direction at the right pace?" These two elements determine the leader's focus and therefore the team's focus as well.

- - - - - - - - - **Direction** - - - - - - - - ➤
(Pace)
How fast can you get there!

When the direction is clear, the entire team feels the same sense of urgency; everyone takes more action and is clear on what they must do. In fact, *clarity* is probably the most important word in any language. Think about it: when you are not clear on something, it stops you from taking action. And if, as a leader, you are not clear on something, you will not communicate as clearly and effectively to your people.

There is a great saying: "If it is a mist in the pulpit, it is a fog in the pew."

In other words, if something isn't understandable in *your* mind, it will be even less so when you start speaking about it to others. Successful leaders create clarity in everything they do and say. You could even say that a leader's job is to bring clarity to their people, helping them to always see a way forward, and keep them moving in the direction of the teams' goals.

Define Outcomes to Achieve and Monitor Milestones

Successful leaders unambiguously define what needs to be achieved, or they *jointly* define this with their teams. They then ask their staff to report on the milestones throughout the journey toward this outcome.

- - - - - - - - - Milestones - - - - M - - - - - M - - - - - M - - - - - - ➤

Outcomes

versus

- - - - - - - - - · Activities - - - - - - - - - -
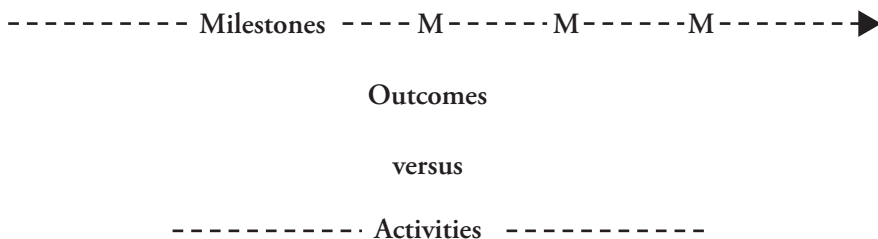
Will your people have more ownership for their milestones or yours? Obviously, theirs. Therefore, asking your people to discuss *their* milestones motivates them to take more ownership for the pace of progress toward the achievement, and this is extremely important when leading across distances and cultures. Because it's so difficult, almost impossible, in fact, to manage activities at a distance, you lead by following up on the achievement of *milestones* versus activities. And getting your employees to describe and feel enthusiasm for these milestones is what compels them to feel ownership for the pace of the achievement.

Of course, not all of your people will want to take ownership for outcomes. Some simply want to come to work and complete the activities they are told to do. Every organization has activity-focused people who aren't motivated and want someone else to do all their thinking for them. These are not the right people to have on your team; they lack that essential desire to own achievement.

However, they're not a lost cause entirely. Giving these people small outcomes to achieve and then gradually increasing those outcomes is one way to start motivating them—and testing to see whether they will ever start embracing that sense of ownership.

Small outcomes (o) to larger outcomes (O)

If, however, you find that some people never want to take ownership for the outcomes—small or large—you likely have to work on moving them out of the team. If you or other team members always have to do the thinking for these people, then they'll keep everyone else from achieving *their* own outcomes. It takes strength to do

something about these people, but it's necessary for the good of your team.

Your People Reveal How You Need to Lead

There is another benefit in asking your people for their milestones: it helps you gauge your own leadership effectiveness. The quality of their answers will reveal to you how successful you have been in leading them and what you may need to change.

Team members who set milestones that make sense and link to other initiatives can be trusted to deliver without having to be closely monitored. Conversely, team members who provide milestones that don't connect to the team's initiatives likely require close monitoring to ensure they successfully deliver. This kind of assessment allows you to be a more effective leader, which helps you and your team deliver more—*and* saves you time.

What are the most important criteria for setting milestones? This is important, because the clarity and quality of the milestones drive both the achievement and the pace that the achievement is delivered. The right milestones:

- Mark a clear achievement that is visible within and outside the team.
- Are measurable (quantitatively or qualitatively) in some universally agreed-upon way.
- Timed to match up with other key initiatives where there are shared milestones.

Your real power of influence as a leader comes from your *questions*, not your answers. The more you ask, the more you understand your people—and the better you can determine how to lead them in ways that prompt their best performance. Remember, without asking

questions, you're merely guessing, which is not a sound strategy for anything.

There are three key questions you can ask to uncover some important information to lead your team well:

1. What's the plan?

    What will you achieve, and what are the milestones to get there?

2. Who's in charge?

    Which individuals, team, or teams are responsible for delivering it?

3. Compared with what?

    How are you defining good performance? What are you comparing it against?

The last one was of particular interest to General Creech. He knew that "good" is only good by comparison.

So ask yourself, *What comparison am I using to understand whether my team is delivering good performance?* People take more ownership to improve their performance when it is clear what good is and why it's crucial to reach that level of performance. If they don't have a benchmark or a target, they miss the incentive to use their creativity to look for new and better ways to do their job and improve their performance.

One of the most important jobs leaders have is to set the right expectations for their team's performance, and that starts by making it clear what they are using to compare good and bad performance. Successful leaders are constantly seeking external benchmarks and best practices in order to give their employees a performance comparison that will both stretch them to higher levels of performance *and* demonstrate that it is something within their reach, making it *achievable*.

Ownership Enables Pride

The general's target went beyond outcomes, ownership, and commitment; it also included pride. He knew that people who take pride in what they do will do it well and continuously search for ways to do it *better*.

In the airplanes example mentioned earlier, team members were first focused on only their activities (fixing the engine, loading the weapons, etc.). That brought them some satisfaction if they did it well and were recognized for it. However, after they began working as a team, focusing on the outcome of the plane flying, they felt more pride in their own work because it went beyond just a single person's activity; it was a team effort. Successful teams have team members with both individual and team pride.

Your staff will take more pride in achieving an outcome than simply fulfilling a task. This is why it is so important to maintain a focus on outcomes. Your employees will be prouder of what they do when you *focus, monitor*, and *recognize* their achievements.

Unfortunately, pride can get a bad rap in today's world because it's often confused with ego. However, ego is different; it is *pride without humility*. Pride + humility = *magic*, and *that* is when you get the top performance from the people in your team. When you instill pride in your people and team, they will truly deliver magical performance for you.

What are the ways you can create pride in achievement for your team? In every team, what you talk about comes about. Successful leaders continually recognize and celebrate their people and teams' accomplishments. Pride, like trust, is not a given; it's something that you must constantly reinforce through recognition.

Recognition comes in many forms, but there are some key ingredients that create stronger pride:

- Provide timely recognition. Give it when the achievement was accomplished.

- Be specific, and highlight good behaviors that enabled that achievement.

- Recognize both individuals and teams. It takes both personal and team ownership.

- Link the achievement and recognition to the team's goals and vision.

- Be consistently different. Recognition in the same ways all the time becomes boring.

Drive Outcomes-Focused Meetings

Meetings are common in all organizations and industries. Chances are, if you were to ask your staff, they would say that they attend far too many meetings. In fact, they might be rushing off to the next (often unproductive) meeting and not even have time to answer.

How often do you hear someone say, "We need a meeting to discuss this"? There is probably a smile (or a scowl!) on your face right now, since you've likely heard that expression many, many times. Consider this as well: Is discussion an activity or an outcome? It's an activity—which is why meetings are often so ineffective.

When you're framing your meetings with an activity focus, all you get is more and more discussion. Successful meetings are focused on *outcomes*—and meetings can really have only three outcomes:

1. An agreed-upon decision
2. An agreed-upon action
3. Consistent understanding (meaning staff will take consistent action after the meeting)

What are you thinking when you leave a poorly run meeting? Probably something like, "What a waste of time *that* was." And that's not something your organization can afford. So many leaders create problems for themselves because they're not able to run good meetings. If you happen to be one of these visionary leaders who does not like the discipline and structure involved in organizing meetings, then get somebody close to you to run the meeting for you. You can't afford to have your people leaving your meetings thinking, "This was a waste of time."

This seven-step process will help you run more outcome-focused meetings:

1. *Successful outcome:* What's the outcome for everyone?
2. *Key topics to cover:* What needs to be discussed to achieve the outcome?
3. *Right participants:* Who needs to be there?
4. *Prework needed:* What work must be done before the meeting to achieve the outcome?
5. *Participants to talk to:* What individual alignment is necessary for faster meeting alignment?
6. *Agenda:* How can we structure the timing to achieve the outcome?
7. *Follow-up:* What do we need to do after the meeting to take follow-up action?

Do you ever need to lead conference calls with people in different locations around the world? If you do, you know how challenging it can be to keep everyone's attention on the call and away from e-mail. Experienced conference call leaders do one thing to keep their people's attention: they say the names of people in the different locations throughout the call. They know that when people hear their names,

they stop checking their e-mail and doing other tasks and immediately return their attention to the call—often wondering what was said about them. These leaders find a way to refer to their people's input—and by saying people's names throughout the call, they command their attention the entire time.

The first question you should always ask when you're invited to a meeting is: "What's the successful outcome for this meeting?" It will force the meeting holder to articulate what he or she really wants to achieve, versus only what he or she wants to discuss—and it may cause the leader to realize that a meeting might *not* be necessary, after all.

When you speak in outcomes (the language of achievement), including during meetings, you get more ownership, commitment, and achievement from your team.

What Stops Leaders from Taking an Outcomes Focus?

It is all about what a leader needs to feel in control. People like certainty. They don't like drastic change that leaves them uncertain about what to focus on—what they need to do and how they need to do it. Leaders are the same; they want to feel that they're in control. Unfortunately, the higher you rise in a team, the more uncertainty you're faced with and the more ambiguous your job's focus will be. You don't have as many bosses above you, and you're expected to define your own work and motivate yourself to do it.

So what do you need to feel in control? This question drives a lot of our behaviors, especially as leaders. If you're the type of person who needs detailed information on the status of every project, your inbox will always be full and you'll be constantly inundated with questions from people who are relying on you for the answers. They will rely on your micromanaging to prevent them from making bad decisions. This way of working becomes impossible for leaders across distances

and cultures, unless you want to give up more of your personal and family life to do it.

Leadership Behaviors Are Shaped by This Need for Control

Although a great number of leaders perceive access to information as a way of being in control, others know that they can gain the same level of control by looking at whom they put in charge of things. In other words, if the people they put in charge or allocate to their teams feel ownership of the outcomes (the achievements), they can take responsibility without the leader needing to micromanage their activities. They achieve a sense of control by putting trust in key people and monitoring the achievement of outcomes rather than managing and controlling activities.

Real control is through *people*, not information.

When your people own achievement, you have more control. There's a big difference between gaining control through monitoring achievement and milestones and doing so by managing activities and dealing with a constant stream of updates.

What Do Your Inbox and Calendar Say about You?

Other people can infer a great deal about your leadership style simply by looking your received and sent e-mails, as well as the appointments and meetings you have in your calendar. There are two key factors that drive them both: one is control, which we've already discussed; the other is choice.

Choice—Driver's Seat or Passenger's Seat?

Your leadership and your life are driven by your choices, and your most important choice is whether to take the driver's seat or the

passenger's seat. With respect to e-mail, there are far too many people who let their inbox drive their day. It's always your choice as to what meetings you choose to attend or not. Successful leaders know that their greatest power is their power of choice, and they never surrender their power of choice to their people or others around them.

What It Takes to Feel in Control?

As discussed earlier, the knowledge you must have to feel in control propels many of your daily and weekly behaviors. It prompts the e-mails you send and the information you request, as well as your need for more meetings to stay updated on everything you feel you need to know. With so much information available to all of us these days, the key is deciding what specific information you need to take action. Said in another way: you can take more action and achieve success faster when you decide what you *don't* need to know.

First, let's take a look at what your inbox reveals about you:

- If you look to your inbox to decide what to do next, then others drive your day.
- If you ask to be informed about everything, then you will be informed about everything.

Second, let's look at what your calendar might reveal:

- If your days are booked solid with meetings, you're letting others drive your day.
- If you have 1-hour meetings, you tend to become discussion focused instead of outcome focused.
- If you don't block off your best times for you, you're surrendering to others' priorities.

What would your inbox and calendar say about your leadership style? Do they indicate that you're outcomes or activities focused? And what do they say about your need for control? It's a good exercise to review these and ask yourself those questions. The answers will indicate how you use your power of choice and what it takes for you to feel in control.

Thinking and Discussing in Outcomes versus Activities (Takeaways)

- Package all your conversations in the language of achievement; that is, speak in terms of outcomes.

- Ask your people for the milestones. Their responses reveal to you how they need to be led.

- Drive outcomes-focused meetings; you cannot afford to waste your people's time.

Your Key Reflection Questions

- Have I focused all my conversations and meetings on achievement and outcomes?

- What are the most important visible results and experiences that my team delivers?

- How would my people know, based on my behaviors, that I'm in charge of my inbox and calendar?