

## **What a Rescue Dog's Story Reminded Me about the Power of Communication**

### ***How a Friend's Dog became an Unexpected Rescue Dog...***

Many times the lessons we learn that can apply to our professional lives are taught through personal experiences. This past Christmas weekend, a close friend I've known for more than 20 years died from lung and ovarian cancer. There are many lessons and experiences I've shared with her over the years that I could write about today. She and I followed compatible career paths and therefore collaborated on more than one occasion; and I can recall more than a few shared lessons we've learned about organizational communication and leadership influence.

But sometimes it's the simple life moments that make the most profound and lasting impact. When my friend was aware she was living her last days and was not going to go home, she reached out to another long-time friend to commit to caring for her dog, Stanley. She was asking him to care for a pet that she loved and had rescued as a puppy. I believe that when he agreed to take Stanley, it was her understanding that his agreement was a promise to ensure a permanent home for the dog.

Something went wrong with that arrangement pretty quickly. Within a month after my friend had died, I learned the man did not like Stanley and wanted to find him a new home. At least two mutual friends and I communicated that we would find him a home and a group of five or six of us began to actively plan for a new arrangement. Instead of waiting for us or cooperating with us though, he instead had dumped the dog into a kill shelter without notice. Fortunately, we were able to intervene and get Stanley out of the shelter one day before his scheduled euthanasia date.

As I look back on the experience, I am frankly bewildered as to why anyone would send a healthy four-year-old dog to a kill shelter—and am especially judgmental about doing so after making a commitment of care to a dying friend. I make no excuses for the choice to go to a kill shelter rather than allowing another friend to re-home the dog.

The curious nature in me also seeks business lessons in the experience. My primary take-aways are to focus on the causes of miscommunication and the principles that create shared understanding and clarity.

***Here are three Powerful Communication Lessons I learned from Stanley's kill shelter experience—and how they also apply in our professional lives:***

#### **1.) Communicate Clear Expectations**

When we communicate, especially when we are seeking to influence others to do something, we must be clear and specific. In the case of my friend who asked her pal to

take care of her dog, I do not know if she thought the dog would stay with him indefinitely or if she anticipated he might find another home. What I do know, from knowing her well and understanding how she felt about her dog, was that she expected her pet to be safe. If she didn't communicate clearly about what that meant to her—and what she was really asking of the man—there may have been some misunderstanding about what he was agreeing to do.

Making expectations clear and being specific about what we ask is important because it's really only when others understand what we want that they can act on those wishes. In the work place, vague directives can leave people with too much guesswork about the level, quality, deadline and results that are expected. It can feel tedious (or even condescending) to include specifics. Yet the alternative to clearly communicating can leave you with frustration, inefficient work and duplicative efforts. When dealing with newer workers who are still learning, unclear communication can also inhibit their ability contribute quickly and grow with the job. Take the time to respectfully and completely convey what you want done, by when and for what goal or purpose. Clear expectations empower people and improve outcomes.

## **2.) Do Not Assume Shared Values or Goals**

The assumptions we make about whether others share our values and goals can often indicate why we fail to clearly communicate our expectations. As I stated earlier, when my friend entrusted her dog to someone, I understood that to mean that she expected him to ensure the dog had a permanent home. Her values around pets included her notion a pet should be cared for its entire life; and that when that is not possible it should then be placed in another home. It wasn't in her frame of reference to choose take a pet to a kill shelter rather than taking the time to find a permanent home either independently or through a rescue group. She may have assumed that her friend shared those values, or at least respected that she had those values, enough that he would act the same way she would.

The same type of miscommunication can interfere with our ability to set clear expectations at work. When leaders fail to convey goals (frequently and repetitively) or model a company's stated values, then there is no reason to assume employees will understand what the goals and values are. We cannot assume shared understanding or support of goals and values without first clearly expressing and repeating what those things are. Remember too, what gets measured gets managed. If you say your values are customer service, yet it's consistently a particular process that you measure to evaluate performance—you are modeling what you actually value most. Your team will respond accordingly. Don't assume they'll still value service more if you're leading them a different direction. Be sure of what you're communicating.

## **3.) People Expect Your Words and Actions to Align**

This one sounds like a no-brainer every time it comes to mind. But in our heavily distracted world where we continue to think we're successfully multi-tasking, there are continual examples of people seeming to do things differently than they said they would.

It sure seems to me that's what happened with my friend and her dog. I sat in a hospital room and witnessed my friend thanking that man for taking Stanley and making sure he was safe. And I watched the man say she was welcome for his help. On that day, I would have told you I witnessed a promise between two friends that when the one friend died, the other would ensure her dog was safe and had a home. There were a few other friends in our circle who believed the same thing. And we all expected his actions to follow those words. Within five weeks though, he dumped the dog in a kill shelter. We definitely viewed that as a very different thing than what he'd seemingly promised our mutual friend. His actions betrayed his words, and it created an impression of him lacking integrity.

I've seen this at work too, and it always leaves a negative feeling whether it was intended or not. It can happen easily. A leader promises to follow-up on a conversation and then gets too distracted and forgets. A manager commits to an open-door policy and then finds herself unavailable most of the day due to over commitment or lack of time management. A co-worker repeatedly commits to completing something in one day and cannot get it done in less than three days. In any of these cases, though it was likely unintended, someone feels betrayed and trust or reputation is diminished. People expect words and actions to align, especially among those they depend on for something or for whom they work.

### **In Conclusion...**

Stanley's story has a happy dog ending. We have found him a new home with a great family. I am now sure, however, that many pets are needlessly sent to kill shelters when other solutions are readily available. I remain just as certain that my late friend never would have expected that a friend she trusted would have done so with her dog (If you have pets, plan ahead for their needs should something happen to you).

While miscommunication allowed a negative outcome, it was **clear communication** among other friends that **turned it into a positive**. We stayed in touch and were thus able to react in time, and collaborated to find an alternative solution. The true power of communication lies in our understanding of and ability to connect with others—and it's one of the most important and relevant leadership skills we have.

***If we communicate clear expectations, ensure shared goals and values are understood, and align our words and action in integrity; we can communicate powerfully for powerful and effective results.***