

Fall 2021

## One Sentence Matters

*I would love to hear more.*

That is all she needed to say, and it would have made the difference.

I remember the day vividly over 33 years ago. I was telling my new leader about some things I loved very much about my previous employer, the John Harland Check Printing Company.

Without pausing for a moment, she replied, *This isn't Harland.*

I was crushed and felt differently about both her and me for the remaining years we worked together, and beyond.

Think how differently I would have felt if she had said, *Tell me more.*

I've been working with a company recently who merged two companies together. In both locations, employees are struggling with the loss of their autonomy and prior uniqueness of their prior culture. Leaders, in contract, are enthusiastically focused on the opportunities of the future.

When an employee makes a comment representing their struggle, it may sound something like:

*In the past we used to \_\_\_\_\_.*

*This is not the way we've done it.*

*I've been here for 30 years, and I don't know where I fit anymore.*

*There is so much change going on; it's difficult.*

If you're the leader, what will your first sentence be after hearing a comment similar to any of the above?

If you don't understand your employees' need to be heard, to have an opinion and to be acknowledged for their loss, you might say something like,

*Well, we're not focused on the past anymore.*

*We can't do things the way you did in the past.*

*Just keep doing what you're doing.*

*It is, but we don't have a choice.*

If you do understand your employees' need to be heard, to have an opinion and to be acknowledged for their loss, you might say something like:

*I'd like to learn more.*

*How do you feel about this new way?*

*I realize we have to figure things out, and for now I want you to know you're invaluable to us and to our future.*

*Change can be difficult; would you like to share more about your struggle?*

Whatever your first sentence, your employee will likely remember it well beyond their moment of struggle.

Choose wisely and with care.

*Aleta Norris provides an ongoing column on developing better leadership skills. She is a leadership expert and Principal at Living as a Leader LLC.*

