

Leadership Guide: *Intent vs. Impact*

“We judge ourselves by our intentions; we judge others by the impact of their behavior on us.”

Organizational life is rife with misunderstandings, missed opportunities, mistakes, and conflict. Many of these issues result from *confusing a person’s communication intent with the actual impact*.

Understanding the dynamic process that occurs from intent (which happens before the communication) through impact (which happens after the communication) can significantly enhance a leader’s ability to motivate and influence effectively.

Have you ever experienced a misunderstanding over what you thought was something clearly communicated without any emotional component?

Did you ever have an unexpected impact on a person to whom you were communicating and had no understanding as to why?

We tend to assume that because we have good intentions, our behaviors will reflect our good intent. Think about a time when someone has been angry with you when you did something well-intentioned. It’s a baffling experience, because you’ve judged yourself by your good intent.

Leaders must be particularly sensitive to their impact, because there is a tendency to read more into behaviors of those in positions of authority. Often, well-intentioned leaders do not appreciate the impact of their behavior on others within their organizations.

An important communication concept is INTENT vs. IMPACT!

Think about the archer shooting arrows at a target.



Intent—The archer represents communication intent. She intends to communicate meaning to another person (or group).

Message—Unfortunately, intentions (thoughts) cannot be transferred directly from one mind to another. The communicator must use words and symbols to convey a message as skillfully as he is able that will closely approximate his intended meaning. The arrow represents the message, or what is actually said.

Impact—The target represents the impact of the message on the receiver—in other words, how the message is heard and interpreted. In the unlikely case that the receiver hears and interprets the message exactly as the sender intended it, the metaphorical target has been hit in the center of the bull's-eye. Of course, this rarely happens.

Why is there so often a difference between intent and impact? There are two fundamental reasons: 1) the “sender” lacks the skills to articulate a message that precisely reflects his or her thoughts, or 2) the “receiver” hears/understands the message differently than the sender intended due to subjective interpretive *filters* (that the sender has failed to adequately adjust for).

What can you do when you realize that your intention and impact are not congruent?

First, ask yourself some questions:

- What just occurred?
- How is the outcome different from what intended/ expected?
- Where can I take responsibility?
- How do I clean this up?

Second, take action to clean up mismatches of intent and impact as quickly as you can:

- Communicate your appreciation that your intention and impact were not in alignment.
- Invite and listen to the other person's perspective.
- Take responsibility for your actions/words.
- Indicate how you could have managed the communication more effectively.
- Ask if there is anything else that the other person needs to hear from you.