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Surprise Me, Please!

We all must have heard, maybe a thousand times, an executive say something like, “I hate surprises. Don’t surprise me.” That’s become a mantra for business managers, almost the executive equivalent of Dirty Harry’s “Go ahead, make my day.”

Of course, we know from our MBTI databank that most managers, in the U.S., Latin America, Europe, and elsewhere are mostly “TJs”, Thinking-Judgers; and that style is frequently associated with managers who are characterized as “logical decision-makers”. They can be analytical and decisive, tough-minded, and effective in implementation, says the Myers-Briggs manual. But once they have made a decision and implemented a course of action, they generally don’t want the course changed nor the boat rocked. And the element of surprise is not appreciated, especially if it’s not planned for. (“Planned surprise” is, of course, an oxymoron!)

So what’s an iNtuitive like me to do, when I confess that I actually like surprises. Well, not any kind of surprises, mind you, such as the negative surprise when your kid tells you, “Guess what, Dad, I got a D in biology.” Not really a lot of fun there, right? Nor is it fun when we find out that someone we have coached hard decides to leave the organization.

Then there are those rambunctious, surprise-resistant kids who can’t wait for Christmas and ransack the house looking for their presents so they won’t have to endure the surprises under the tree. And there are the very-very planned prospective parents who dash off to the ultra-sound so they’ll know what color baby clothes to buy, and so they can narrow down their name choices to just one gender set. On the job, we sometimes work with folks who have to know their vacation schedule a year ahead of time, maybe even before they go on vacation this year. No surprises, please!

But most people in our lives can wait a bit for the answers, withstand the pressures of change and surprise, and work their way through the challenges of both. I think we all prefer positive change and positive surprise to negative change and negative surprise, and that’s where I come back to my own preference for surprise. What I really mean is, “surprise me good, don’t surprise me bad”.

So that’s what I look for in a productive approach to leadership, how to engineer, motivate, and appreciate positive surprises among colleagues. Most of all in our organization, TEAM International®, I’d like us to positively surprise our clients and participants, so that they think and say that we performed above the expectations they had when they started their experiences with us.

So I say, “Surprise Me, Please”, and keep me and our clients surprised every time. I really hope that is our Brand, and that we are known for positively surprising our customers for 25 years now! Sound easy in today’s world? Of course not....

But let me tell you about a little something we have done to move that “surprise culture” along. We now have instituted a President’s “Surprise Me” Award for employee colleagues, granted not just once a year, but every time we see, or a client sees (surprising) performance. At that time, I give a \$100 bill and a plaque attesting the accomplishment to the colleague for the surprise. Let me give you a recent example:

In April of 2008, we completed our first in-country *Leadership for Growth*[™] program in Colombia. As you can imagine, as a start-up program, there was a storm of complications. The TEAM International® colleague (Claudia, from our Mexico office) who had administered the program did an excellent job in keeping everything and everybody moving, including us facilitators. Now here was the nut of the surprise thing for me: one day I noticed that the feedback results from the day before were not posted. I was about to complain when I remembered our coaching maxim: Inquiry, then Advocacy. So I asked first. It turned out that the hotel site was charging some outrageous rate for printer rental, and that she had decided to rent the printer only one day and print out the results the following day, thus saving us a couple hundred bucks in program costs. BINGO! Claudia gets the *Surprise Me* plaque, and the \$100, and we still save about \$100 net. Now there’s a win-win game for everyone. (Except for the hotel, of course, and shame on them!)

Now here’s the dénouement of the story: Claudia was in Colombia for the first time, and she had a ball. Not only that, it was her first time outside Mexico, and her first plane ride ever! How’s that for a series of surprises for her, and a great story for all of us to tell about our first program in Colombia...? But the real point is not just a cute story, it’s about what we all can do to change company culture, even in small ways, around desirable behaviors in the desired culture. In this case, we hope to reward and promote a caring culture, one that cares about customers. In order to do that, I believe, we have to care about each other first. And given that, we want to be intentional about stimuli that give the message that we care about people who care about others and about the company that brings us together. Let’s try to surprise them positively every time as we go about our work!

So we keep on keeping on trying to do things that communicate that message, and sooner or later our surprises will no longer surprise, and we may have to do something else. But I hope the message will always be the same in our culture – we care about others, and those who join us in this unifying principle.

So, in the meantime, “Surprise Me, Please!”