

# Full Speed Ahead...Or Backwards— Which Way Are You Going?

By Leonard Lang, Ph.D

It's surprisingly easy to assume we **know the solution** to a problem and **are implementing** it, when we are going full speed ahead the opposite direction-- continuing and increasing the problem instead.

To help you see what I mean, I want to share with you an example of the kind of coaching conversation I have had with various executives who are creating a closed, non-innovative, and even angry staff even though they believe they are doing the opposite.

In this composite example, we are again talking about the value of specific and relevant praise and support for new ideas as one part of developing a culture of innovation.

Exec: I've been praising people as you suggested, but I admit that they still seem to think I'm not very open or supportive.

Leonard: Give me an example.

Exec: Someone comes up with an idea at a staff meeting about a problem. I tell them that it's great and I appreciate it.

Leonard: OK, that sounds good so far. Tell me about one time this happened lately.

Exec: Someone suggested that we might want to try increasing client satisfaction by having a client ombudsman, a single go-to person on their side.

Leonard: What did you say?

Exec: I started right off mirroring like we've been discussing.

Leonard: Excellent. Let's hear as best as you can remember word for word what you said.

Exec: So your idea is a dedicated ombudsman focused on client concerns would increase client satisfaction?

Leonard: Good. Then what?

Exec: Then I praised the idea.

Leonard: How?

Exec: I said, thanks. That's fresh thinking which is what we need, but in this case I happen to know we can't ...

Leonard: Hold on right there. Did you hear what you just said?

Exec: No. What?

Leonard: You negated the entire positive comment with "but" and "we can't." Whatever you said before that will be immediately forgotten or dismissed as BS once you hit the word, "but."

Exec: But we couldn't do the idea. I was right.

Leonard: Maybe so. Or maybe, as we'll discuss, you can learn to build on even the "worst" ideas instead of losing their value. In any case, you've turned a praising statement into a correcting one, and it will be heard that way, **especially if the staff already sees you as unsupportive**. So what happened after your comment?

Exec: Not much. No one had any more ideas, and the energy level dropped even further I'd say.

Leonard: Yep. That kind of comment would even shut me up after a few times, and that's not easy to do!

Clearly this executive was **making matters worse** while **assuming he was helping**. He thought he was praising, but he wasn't. He's not alone.

Want to see how you're doing? Ask yourself what you are doing that seems like it **should** work, but isn't working at all. Then look **in detail** at what you are thinking, saying and doing. While playing detective, **assume you alone are the one creating this opposite effect**, even if you have a million reasons why that's not possible. That way you can find how you might be at least contributing to the problem so you can start looking for an alternative and better solution.

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