



# PaperChain®

## LINK & LEARN

### **“Just tell me what you want me to do.”**

In the 1986 film, *Heartbreak Ridge*, Clint Eastwood played Marine Gunnery Sergeant Thomas Highway. Highway is a battle hardened veteran who is assigned to mold a group of rookie Marines into an elite fighting unit. Each morning Eastwood leads his men on a run and instructs them that they are all to wear the same tee-shirt as he wears. The challenge for his men is that he never tells them what shirt he will be wearing. In the film, this is played for comic relief and his men have to work together to try to find out what the “Gunny” will be wearing.

While amusing in the film, this practice is all too common in the business world. I know a manager of a digital sales team who is very personable and quite intelligent. She is technically proficient, but a poor communicator. She does not clearly describe her expectations to her team or properly explain what she wants them to accomplish. This has resulted in poor sales, low team morale and a very high employee turnover rate. She gives her employees vague instructions and is impatient with them when they ask questions for clarification. Her people try to do their best, try to do what they believe she wanted done and usually are rewarded for their initiative with a chewing out from their boss. In very short order, this manager’s reps learn that the best way to avoid her wrath is to do as little as possible while looking for another job. Her company lost a number of promising employees and untold revenue from her lack of clarity.

Unless they intend to hire a team of psychics and mind readers fully equipped with Ouija boards and crystal balls, leaders need to learn how to communicate their wishes to their teams and how to give clear instructions. One of the most important rules of management I have ever learned is, “Nothing is so simple that it cannot be misunderstood!” Here is an example of this, former FBI director J. Edgar Hoover had a dictatorial management style. His staff feared him so much that they seldom dared to ask him any questions. On one occasion, while reviewing a document, Hoover made the following notation on it, “Good report, but watch the borders.” His assistant instantly dispatched hundreds of FBI agents to the Canadian and Mexican borders, where they remained until it was discovered that J. Edgar was referring to the typed margins on the document which he felt were too wide. Explaining yourself clearly,

**You may download this and all issues of Link & Learn at [www.PaperChain.org](http://www.PaperChain.org)**



# PaperChain®

## LINK & LEARN

confirming that your subordinates fully understand what you want, may take a few minutes, but in the long run this practice greatly enhances the effectiveness of any organization.

This commitment to clear communication should begin before an employee even joins the team. When interviewing candidates for employment, a manager should avoid the temptation to “sell the job.” Sometimes an applicant seems like such a perfect fit for an open position, that the hiring manager will do whatever is necessary to get them to accept the job. They sometimes paint an inaccurate picture of the challenges and responsibilities of the position. This is seldom a good practice. It generally gets the relationship with a new employee off on a poor footing. I find it is better to be bluntly honest about both the opportunities and challenges of the position you are trying to fill. Whenever possible, I like to have the candidate meet my sales team and do a ride along to get a clear picture of what the job entails.

When I did make a new hire or when I took over a new sales team, I made a point of clearly explaining my expectations to those reporting to me. I did this in the form of a written set of “Expectations.” This was a numbered list of what I expected from anyone on my team. This was separate from their revenue goals. The items on the list described behaviors that I expected from my people. This included items like punctuality, number of weekly calls, reports required etc. I also included things like, “I expect my reps to let me know if any account is in jeopardy as soon as they become aware of the situation so that we can work together to remedy it.” This kept me in the loop and made reps feel more comfortable coming to me with problems. I also set an expectation that my reps would not demonstrate a negative attitude in the office. I was careful not to mandate that “reps maintain a positive attitude,” which was unenforceable, I simply asked that they share these thoughts with me rather than bringing down the team. I had my reps each sign a copy of the “Expectations,” and I posted these prominently in the sales room. I updated this document whenever the situation dictated and reviewed it with my team at least once a quarter.

Since I believe leadership is a two-way street, along with the “Expectations” I gave my team a copy of my “Commitments” to them.

**You may download this and all issues of Link & Learn at [www.PaperChain.org](http://www.PaperChain.org)**



# PaperChain<sup>®</sup>

## LINK & LEARN

This was a numbered list of what they could expect (at a minimum) from me. This list included a dozen points starting with, “I will treat every member of this team with respect as professional business people and as human beings.” I went on to items like, “I will help you resolve any customer service problem...so you will never need to face problems alone,” and “I will listen to your concerns, remedy them when I can, and if appropriate, communicate them to upper management.” My list concluded, “I will make this job fun,” which I strongly believe is a prerequisite for long-term success. I had these “Commitments” blown up to poster size and posted a copy above my desk and in the sales room. I instructed my team to point to this signed document, whenever I failed to live up to the items on the list. These two documents clearly define my responsibilities as well as those of my team. I believe they fostered a positive work environment where everyone understood where they stood and what they were to do.

In our business, if an instruction is misunderstood, we may lose a sale or, worst case scenario, an account. In the military, lives or a battle, may be lost if an order is not followed precisely. This is why over the centuries the military has developed a simple yet effective protocol for delivering commands. Though the stakes in the publishing world are not as high as they are on the battlefield, this mode of communication provides a good model to follow.

An officer giving a command will describe exactly what they want the person to do and give them a timeline for accomplishing the assigned task. “I need you to take a position on this particular hill and be dug in with your men by 08 hundred hours. You are then to observe the valley below and report back on any enemy activity you see until relieved.” They will then ask their subordinate if they have any questions. If they do, the officer will answer their queries until both the commander and the subordinate are clear on what needs to be done. The officer will then ask, “Understood?” The subordinate will then say, “Yes Sir, I am to take my men to the top of the hill, dig in and observe the valley below looking for enemy activity there until relieved. If any activity is observed, we will report it to you immediately.” If the command is fully understood, they will salute and part. In just a few minutes the officer communicated what he wanted done, when he wanted it done

**You may download this and all issues of Link & Learn at [www.PaperChain.org](http://www.PaperChain.org)**



# PaperChain<sup>®</sup>

## LINK & LEARN<sup>SM</sup>

and why he wanted it done. He also made sure his subordinate had no unanswered questions and had him repeat the order to confirm that he fully understood his instructions.

Following this practice, command, asking for questions, and having the person repeat back the order not only makes sure there is no misunderstandings, but also drives a stake into the heart of the, “I didn’t understand what you wanted” excuse for not doing something. Because the person giving the order fully accepts responsibility for communicating what they want accomplished, responsibility for getting the job done is placed fully on the shoulders of the subordinate. They may fail to accomplish what they’ve been assigned to do, but they cannot honestly say, “They didn’t understand that they were supposed to do it.”

A good definition of a team, or of a business is, “working together toward a common goal.” To do this some people are appointed to leadership roles, ideally because they have the talent and the experience to know how to best achieve the group’s objectives. Their effectiveness is increased by allowing them to use this expertise to direct their team to accomplish more than they ever could on their own. If they are unable to communicate their expertise to those reporting to them, then their effectiveness is negated by their inability to share it with their team. This is why the ability to clearly communicate what you expect of people is the most critical skill in a manager’s toolbox. Your people may have great people skills, they may know your products inside and out, they may be great sales people, but it is unlikely that they are much good at mind reading. When you are “the boss,” your job is not only to tell people what to do...it’s also your job to be sure they understand what you want them to do!

*This article was written by Jim Busch.*

Link & Learn is brought to you every month as part of PaperChain’s<sup>®</sup> mission to provide educational material to the free paper publishers. **If you have an issue you would like to see covered please email [janderson@wisad.com](mailto:janderson@wisad.com), put “Link & Learn” in subject line.** Be sure to check out [www.paperchain.org](http://www.paperchain.org) for past issues, electronic ready promotional ads and much more to help you remain competitive.

**You may download this and all issues of Link & Learn at [www.PaperChain.org](http://www.PaperChain.org)**