A. HAUS KORNERSTONE

# LEADERSHIP

## Leading from Depth and Not from Noise

*Dr. Marcy Carvalho*

# When everyone wants an answer

A HYPOTHETICAL SCENE

“Can we tell them the report is still going out at noon?”

Elena had barely sat down. Two people were already talking over each other. One wanted to send the report as promised. The other said the totals were wrong. A message from Elena’s director lit up her phone. “Are we still on track?”

Elena had told her director the day before that the report was ready. She felt the urge to say yes and sort it out afterward. Instead, she set her phone facedown.

“Let me hear what each of you is seeing,” she said. She listened while one colleague explained that the file was ready to send. Then she turned to Nia, who had flagged the totals. “Walk me through what you saw.”

Nia opened her laptop. The report had been pulled before the last batch of numbers came in. She had flagged the gap that morning, but the person preparing the file for delivery thought she was talking about an older version.

Elena looked at the clock. “What would someone get wrong if they used this report at noon?”

“They’d see three teams as behind,” Nia said. “Two have already finished.”

That settled the noon question. “Hold the report,” Elena said. “Nia, check the totals against the final batch. Send me the corrected figures by one. I’ll tell the people expecting the report what happened and give them an update at one thirty.”

“What if we still can’t verify it by then?” someone asked.

“I’ll tell them what we’ve verified and what’s still open,” Elena said. “We’ll send the report when the numbers are right.”

Then she picked up her phone and made the call herself.

# Listen for what changes the decision

When you lead a team, people often come to you after they've been sitting with a problem for hours. You may have had thirty seconds to hear it. In my work leading a team that supports several organizations, I know how easy it is to feel that you owe everyone an answer in those thirty seconds.

Elena heard two things that sounded like a disagreement. One person said the report was ready. Another said the numbers were wrong. Both were describing something real. The file was ready to send, and the figures inside it were incomplete. Once Elena understood that, she could stop arguing about whether the report was "ready" and decide what to do about the people who would rely on it.

If someone says, "They dropped the ball again," ask them to walk you through what happened. You may find out that a task was missed. You may also find out that two people thought the other person had it. You'll handle those situations differently. Give the person enough time to finish, then say back what you heard so they can correct you.

# Say what you've decided

Once you have enough to act, tell people what happens next. Elena could make a decision about the noon release while the team checked the numbers. She also gave people a time for an update she could keep, even if the work took longer.

Pay attention to the part of the decision that belongs to you. Elena had made the original promise. It mattered that she made the call about the delay. The person who spoke up about the figures could get back to checking them without having to explain the missed deadline to everyone who was waiting.

Sometimes you'll need to say, "I can decide this part now. I need to check one more thing before I decide the rest. I'll come back to you at three." Then come back at three. If you're still waiting on information, tell them what you learned and when they'll hear from you again.

# Try this in your next difficult conversation

Think of one conversation you're tempted to rush. Before you go in, write down what you've heard and what you still need to find out. If your first thought is "He doesn't care about the deadline," write down what you can point to. "I expected the draft on Tuesday. I received it Thursday." That gives you a place to begin.

1. **Give the other person a chance to fill in the gap.** "I expected the draft Tuesday and got it Thursday. Walk me through what happened between those two days." Let them finish. Then check what you heard. "You were waiting for my approval before you sent it. Have I got that right?"
2. **Ask the question that would change your next step.** If approval held up the work, try, "When did you know you might miss Tuesday, and what did you need from me at that point?" If you hear something you didn't expect, take a moment to think before you answer.
3. **End with an agreement you can both repeat.** "For the next draft, send me what you have by noon Monday and flag anything that still needs my approval. I'll get back to you by four. If that timing puts Tuesday at risk, call me Monday afternoon so we can deal with it then."

Afterward, take a minute to write down the answer that changed your thinking. That will help you recognize what to listen for the next time a conversation starts with a conclusion.

# A closing reflection

There will be days when you hear yourself answer too quickly. You can go back. "I gave you an answer before I heard you out. Can we talk again?" Then make time to hear what you missed.

Think about the person who has to bring you the next piece of bad news. They'll remember what happened the last time someone spoke up. Give them a reason to come to you while there's still time to do something about it.