

# Mission Ready

Volume 2, Issue 5

May 1, 2000

## Seminars/Keynotes

Albuquerque  
Atlanta  
Boise  
Boston  
Cancun  
Charlotte  
Chicago  
Dallas  
Denver  
Fresno  
Honolulu  
Houston  
Jacksonville  
Las Vegas  
Los Angeles  
Louisville  
Memphis  
Miami  
Minneapolis  
Montreal  
Nashville  
New Orleans  
New York  
Oklahoma City  
Orlando  
Ottawa  
Philadelphia  
Phoenix  
Portland  
Sacramento  
Salt Lake City  
San Antonio  
San Diego  
San Francisco  
Santa Barbara  
Seattle  
Tampa  
Vancouver  
Washington DC  
Winnipeg

*In-house Seminars,  
Keynote Speeches and  
Consulting Services  
available.*

## Ensuring Clear Communication in the Workplace

Have you ever asked a receptionist to read back a message you had just left, only to be appalled at his/her interpretation? And were you, initially, rather afraid to even ask that receptionist to read back the message to you, for fear of offending him or her?

Not only are we often afraid to ask our subordinates, "What did I say?", we're afraid to ask our supervisors, "What did *you* say?" In one case, we don't want to offend; in the other, we don't want to appear inattentive. And, in both cases, we part company somewhat in doubt.

Nowhere is clear communication more important than on the battlefield, where lives can be lost through simple misunderstandings of orders. That's why every Marine is trained from Day One to voluntarily provide feedback indicating his/her understanding of the order. The Marine may simply repeat the directive back to the person who gave it, or provide a written plan (usually nothing elaborate, maybe a hand written paragraph) showing how he/she intends to carry out the order. In either case, that Marine wants to be the first to know if he/she has understood that directive correctly.

Wouldn't it be a wonderful workplace if the people under our supervision voluntarily indicated their understanding of our directives? That kind of habitual response can be cultivated by a manager who constantly solicits a confirmation every time he/she gives an "order." The Marine Corps method of repeating the order, loudly and clearly, may be a bit robust for the office, but there are certainly kinder and gentler ways of finding out if your directive is clearly understood.

For example, you might say to your employee, "My wife/husband tells me I'm not

always the best communicator. If you had to tell Tom what has to be done, how would you phrase it?" Or, you could ask for a written paragraph of how your instructions will be carried out. Either way, you will know instantly if you and your employee are of the same mind.

As managers, we must be sure we do not discourage questions. This is especially true in times of emergencies, when our employees are tempted to show their understanding of the urgency of the situation by their own vigorous response - often racing off in the wrong direction. We have to be sure that our own body language, facial expression, etc., does not discourage our people from asking for clarification.

And, of course, as managers we must first make sure that we understand what is expected of us from "on high." If our bosses are the "curt and brief type," it is all the more important for us to repeat - verbally, or in memos, faxes or e-mails - our understanding of what has to be done.

Once ingrained, the Marine Corps habit of voluntarily repeating one's orders can save the workplace a lot of costly headaches. No one should be exempt from this fundamental habit, no matter how proficient - not even the "rocket scientists" in your organization. JPL's recent Mars probe failure - due to the simplest of misunderstandings of meters and feet - is a case in point. If someone had simply repeated his/her instructions somewhere along the line, that simple misunderstanding could have been caught.