

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Engineering managers know they must solve problems not just with things, but with people, too. But people make problem-solving a bit unpredictable. A five-step model can help engineers in all positions, not just management, bring greater predictability when facing potentially disastrous moments of truth and other organizational issues.



# A leadership model for technical people

BY KEITH MARTINO

Rodger's phone call was a surprise.

I saw him a few weeks earlier. He seemed fine from a distance, but Rodger was one deeply distraught engineer. He was angry. He said he was leaving his longtime employer, a logistics firm on the West Coast. His co-workers, whom he once considered friends, lied to him. His employer did not seem to be the company he joined a decade earlier. He spent 45 minutes ranting that he had to quit. He was on the verge of tears.

Then he broke down. I could feel his anguish from 1,451 miles away.

I listened in stunned silence. Rodger and his colleagues were scheduled to attend a leadership training session soon, and he planned to come. But after that, he said he was gone. No doubt about it. He was heading for greener pastures.

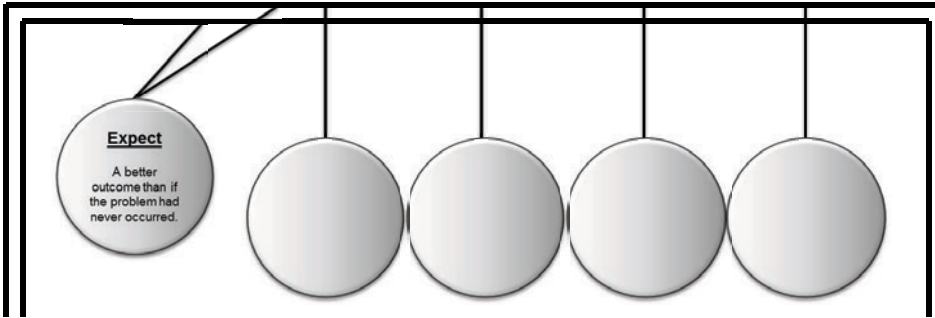
Imagine Rodger's surprise when I flashed his dilemma on the overhead in the midst of the workshop. While Rodger's name was not listed, he

recognized his situation. The group launched into productive ways to solve this seemingly hypothetical scenario. Finally, Rodger couldn't take it anymore. He blurted out that it was his problem they were working to solve.

**The group launched into productive ways to solve this seemingly hypothetical scenario.**

The CEO's jaw dropped. His friends demanded to know who he was describing when he said peers let him down. How could he have gone through four months of agony and a miserable holiday season without rais-

# STEP 1: EXPECT



ing his concerns? How could Rodger say his friends robbed him of his Christmas joy with his family? They were now hurt and furious.

Suddenly, it occurred to me to ask the one question we always ask, which I somehow overlooked in the midst of Rodger's phone tirade.

"Rodger, did you ever talk to your co-workers about the way you felt they each let you down?"

"No," Rodger responded passionately. "I sent one of them an email. I waited on two of them to bring it up to me. I never spoke to any of them about it directly."

Where were Rodger's friends while he was silently drowning in misery? Right down the hall.

One of his peers vaguely remembered an email he received from Rodger months earlier but couldn't remember the issue. Another co-worker said, "Rodger, that issue was resolved the day you brought it to our attention." Two peers had no idea what Rodger was referring to. The CEO was incensed Rodger had never once mentioned issues he felt threatened large customer relationships.

Rodger's comrades weren't down the hall anymore. They were now defending themselves in front of their CEO. They got in Rodger's face. Tempers flared. They hurled accusations. They reminded Rodger of his mistakes and oversights he had long since forgotten. Now Rodger was on the defensive and it wasn't fun.

He had failed to approach each person in private at the time the issues occurred. The consequences were brutal. I wondered how Rod-

ger's family would feel once they learned he ruined their holiday cheer for no reason. He might get lonely at home, as well.

Would Rodger leave over issues he never brought to light? Would the team forgive Rodger for the grudge he harbored for months? Would the CEO trust Rodger to work with world-class customers in the future?

Rodger and his teammates were facing a moment of truth.

## What is a moment of truth?

A moment of truth is that untimely instant when you realize that there is an accelerating problem of seemingly epidemic proportion. You must make a quick decision under unpleasant conditions. You have incomplete information. Your welfare and the welfare of others are at risk. And yes, your entire team is watching.

No matter how large or small the team you lead, a moment of truth will find you.

You'll be greeted with challenges and circumstances you can't control. Your reputation will be at stake. And no matter how coolly you play your cards, your emotions and blood pressure will soar.

So who's to blame? You? Your boss? Your employees? Your customers?

Perhaps all of the above. Consider everyone a suspect, yourself included.

No individual will be entirely at fault. You'll soon discover many of your friends, family or colleagues accidentally contributed to the mess despite their best intentions. There will be no "one throat to choke."

Instead, there will be plenty of blame to spread around. And for you as the leader, the downside will be painfully obvious.

Moments of truth are simple to describe. They're hard to handle.

But from whence do moments of truth come? Often weeks, months or years of neglect culminate toward this calamity. Usually, everyone looks the other way while an emerging issue is brewing. Then at the least desirable moment that pesky issue crosses through a tipping point. Suddenly it picks up speed and quickly digresses into an overnight catastrophe. Everyone and no one saw it coming.

Here's the good news.

When you practice the five simple steps described in this article, you can survive and thrive under the toughest of circumstances. These five steps can lead you on the path to a better solution in your moment of truth and solve tough challenges:

1. Expect
2. Understand
3. And own
4. The positive
5. Future

## Expect

First, envision and communicate a better outcome than if the problem had never occurred. Expect means three things: Envision the ideal end result. Ensure it's the best potential outcome for all parties. Communicate your expectation to your peers.

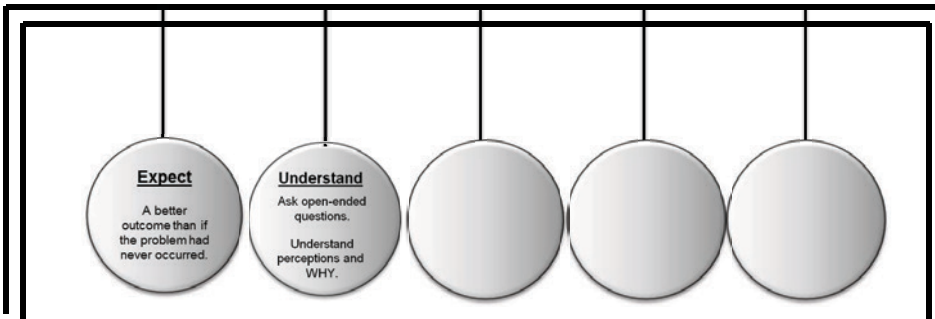
Do we typically spring into a catastrophe expecting and seeking a better outcome from the event than if it had never occurred? Not likely. It's hard to find the silver lining amidst the chaos. Just as importantly, do we communicate a "better than ever" expectation to the involved parties? Usually not.

Notice these nuances: Real enthusiasm is contagious. But, only if it's "real."

Unfortunately, most people tend to cast low or unrealistic expecta-

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## STEP 2: UNDERSTAND



tions. It's human nature. That's why setting a vision for an unexpectedly favorable outcome in a time of chaos is so groundbreaking. It's counter-intuitive. To set high expectations generally requires greater effort and a change in perspective by everyone in your group. The true character of your team is on display when you raise expectations. The faster you can recast your team's expectations, the better. Speed is essential.

Tips for setting expectations include involving your peers, superiors and customers in the process. Discuss the impact of the ideal expectations on each member of your team. Exude authentic confidence by choosing your tone of voice carefully. Stay real. Clear your mind and energize your countenance prior to delivering your message. Proactively seek counsel

from a positive mentor or proven achiever if possible.

There are a few land mines to avoid. Never say something you don't believe to be true. Ensure that every person involved weighs in with their perspective. Don't disengage prematurely. And discuss key points until you have a commitment from key parties.

### Understand

Understand perceptions and why. Asking open-ended questions enables you to gain your colleague's point of view. Here are a few examples that have worked well in times of crisis:

- What happened from your perspective?
- How do you feel about this issue?
- What were the consequences to

our relationship?

- What do you believe contributed to this situation?
- How do you think we should handle this challenge?

When faced with calamity, do we seek to understand? Or are we quick to blame? For most of us, it's not intuitive to ask rational questions in an emotional moment. We may believe we already understand the situation. Yet the empathy we acquire once we begin asking questions brings much-needed clarity. Often, it explains "why" someone did what they did. The "why" is what's important for building a plan.

Notice these nuances.

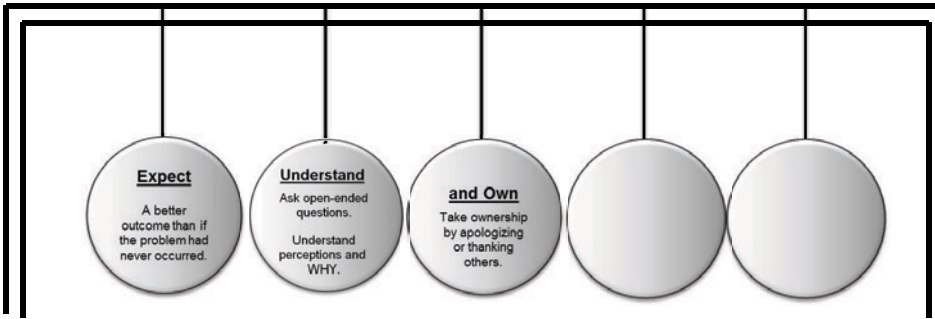
Emotions blind our senses and cause us to become insular in our thinking. Our vantage point is also often limited by our role or position in the organization. In our haste to resolve the perceived challenge, we often overlook feelings. The way each of the involved parties "feels" about the situation can color the perceived outcome. By sincerely seeking to understand, we show we care. Simply solving the immediate problem will not ensure the enthusiasm of the team. Each member of the solution team needs to "feel" better when the problem is resolved.

To help in understanding others, ask the difficult questions even if it feels uncomfortable. Consider the intensity with which each person expresses his opinion. Probe about the priority of each concern that your colleagues raise to determine its relative importance. Prepare a list of questions in advance if possible. This question preparation will free you to listen more closely. Demonstrate a genuine curiosity for how people feel and why they feel as they do.

Step two land mines include knowing that conflict avoidance is deadly. Be willing to face the reality of how others perceive the issues. Be prepared to adjust your perspective somewhat as you acknowledge

**The empathy we acquire once we begin asking questions brings much needed clarity.**

## STEP 3: AND OWN



others' views. Resist the temptation to proceed too quickly. Hear the perspectives of others. Take adequate time to reflect on perspectives. Hasty responses damage trust. And keep your cool no matter what is shared. Focus on reaching the expectation.

### And own

Take ownership by apologizing or thanking others.

To take ownership by apologizing you might say, "I apologize for not acting quickly enough." Or perhaps, "I apologize for not having spoken out sooner." A third example might be to say, "I apologize for not bringing it to your attention earlier."

Saying "thank you" is the other way to take ownership for the issue. For instance, saying "Thank you for sharing your perspective with me" is almost always appropriate. You might also say, "I really appreciate your

honesty in dealing with this matter." Perhaps it's most appropriate to say, "Thanks for your leadership under these difficult circumstances."

This step is difficult for some. Learning to sincerely apologize when we have made a mistake is tough. Apologizing when we intentionally did the wrong thing can be excruciatingly painful but is needed. And it's seldom easy to thank a person for their candor when told something we do not want to hear.

Notice these nuances.

The act of verbalizing a simple, sincere apology is becoming a lost art. And we sometimes forget the admission of having made a mistake is not the same as expressing an apology. Similarly, the acknowledgement of someone's helpful actions is not the same as saying "thank you." Often, the lack of an apology or sincere thanks undermines the potential

of a relationship. A sincere apology or word of thanks can turbocharge many relationships. However, if your words and actions are inconsistent, people believe your actions, not your words.

A few tips can help you apologize or thank others.

Demonstrate sincerity through your words and actions. Focus on the long-term viability of the relationship. Avoid (to the best of your ability) making the same mistake twice. Notice the positive things your peers are doing and overlook their negative actions. Be the first to recognize success and express your thanks.

Again, we have a few land mines to avoid. Don't fail to say "I apologize" simply because your pride is at risk. Don't fail to say "thank you" simply because your pride is at risk. Don't fail to say "thank you" because it has already been expressed by someone else. Don't fail to say "I apologize" because you feel you have also been wronged.

And last, but definitely not least, do not skip over this essential step because you believe it is not needed.

### The positive

No matter what you've learned from the conversation so far, remain positive. That will help you introduce your principles.

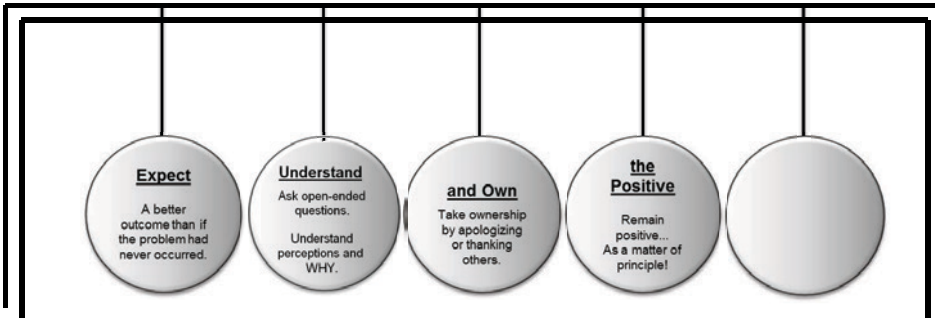
Remaining positive in the face of "understanding" and "owning" the situation can be the key to unlocking the best potential solution. But it doesn't always seem logical to maintain a positive attitude.

But again, notice these nuances.

Human emotions can be volatile. Now is the time to re-energize and remain positive. Successful leaders embrace proven principles that steady their resolve. Effective leaders spotlight the principles that guide their words and actions. So no matter what has been said up to this point, stay positive.

Your company may have a set of values or principles. If not, you can

# STEP 4: THE POSITIVE



use the 10 principles shown below or adapt them to your situation. Practice and mention these principles in difficult conversations:

1. Demonstrate integrity
2. Lead by example
3. Address challenges one-on-one
4. Be proactive
5. Reinforce transparency
6. Encourage others
7. Motivate with passion
8. Deliver solutions
9. Create milestones
10. Improve daily

The main land mine to avoid in this step is failing to embrace a solid set of principles that you know are on target.

## Future

Create a plan with action items, due dates and assigned responsibilities.

The future gets better when we expect leadership. Establish a positive game plan that is achievable and agreeable. Develop specific next steps (action items). Discuss who is responsible for each action item. Agree to a timeline for completion of each action item. Make the plan happen. Adjust the plan as needed.

Our natural tendency is to jump into action before thinking through the development of a plan. Each of these steps challenges our fight or flight instincts. These steps tell us to hang in there and solve the problem while preserving the relationship.

Notice these nuances.

People tend to jump to the solution step too early. It's a deceptive trap. Many problems are resolved in a manner that leaves relationships in shambles. The solution to any catastrophe should solve problems and preserve relationships. Focusing on

the solution prematurely is a perilous approach, at best. Often meetings end before developing action items. This is an ominous signal that your team is not committed to the plan.

When developing your plan, review the ideal outcome again before you begin the planning process. Develop a list of questions that remain unresolved. Ask these questions ASAP. Apologize for any mistakes made. Thank those who have made a positive impact. Ensure that everyone is in a positive mindset by restating key principles. Develop a solid plan with action items, responsible parties and due dates.

Again, we have a few land mines to avoid. Don't settle for a plan that leaves issues unresolved and/or relationships damaged. Don't establish a feedback process that is lax and unresponsive to change. Don't fail to repeat all the steps in the process if the solution is not accomplished quickly.

Don't miss the opportunity to build a stronger team as you resolve the target issue. Don't allow a problem to linger because it is deemed too difficult to resolve.

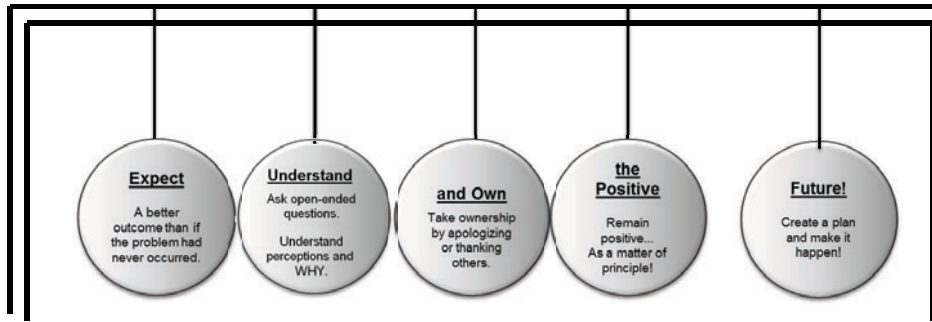
Is dealing with a moment of truth always pleasant? No way. Thankfully, it's often easier than expected. But sometimes it's more painful than a root canal. Either way, you know when you've reached that fork in the road and you have to make a crucial decision. That's when you take a deep breath, collect your wits and remember this model: Expect, understand and own the positive future.

But let's be clear. Everybody won't always be delighted with the short-term outcome. That may not be an achievable goal. This is especially true if certain individuals created the problem you have to resolve. Perfection may never be within reach. You may not be able to guarantee every single relationship will be "good as new" when the dust settles.

However, when you and your friends, family or colleagues look back at the big picture, you will be

Our natural tendency is to jump into action before thinking through the development of a plan.

# STEP 5: FUTURE



better off than if the situation had never occurred. This model streamlines human interaction and leads to a far more predictable outcome for linear thinkers like engineers and project managers. Technical minds retain this model because it brings greater predictability to people challenges, making it quite useful for engineering managers.

Why are the people issues so essential? That's where a magnitude of daily friction takes place for an engineer. Not everyone aspires to be a CEO or executive, but every engineer can demonstrate positive influence (i.e., leadership) in their current role.

## Remember Rodger?

The last time we heard from Rodger the dodger, he was boiling in hot water.

Rodger's CEO was incensed that Rodger had never once mentioned issues to anyone – important issues that could threaten large customer relationships. Rodger's comrades were shouting at him from around the conference room. Why? They felt they had to defend themselves in front of their CEO for their mistakes, which Rodger had dug up from the past. Their tempers flared. They hurled accusations. They reminded Rodger of his own mistakes and oversights, which he'd long since conveniently forgotten.

Rodger was on the defensive that day, and it wasn't funny. He had failed as a leader. He did not approach each of his fellow engineers in private when certain mistakes were made. Instead, the consequences of throwing his co-workers under the bus in front of the CEO were brutal.

It would have been so much simpler if Rodger had only talked with each of them in private months earlier. Now it was too late. And as you may remember, Rodger's frustration resulted in a lousy holiday season for his entire family.

Perhaps out of the necessity to survive, Rodger decided to implement the model described in this article: Expect, understand and own the positive future. And it reshaped his stature in the company.

**Expect:** Rodger committed himself to improving his relationship with his peers. He decided to raise the expectations on himself instead of his peers. He began to look inside his own behavior and communication strategies instead of expecting his co-workers to be squeaky clean.

**Understand:** He sought out a time to talk with each of them in private. He asked questions to understand the best medium and time of day to approach each of them regarding issues they face in the future.

**And own:** Rodger apologized to each of his colleagues in the room that day for having broken several of the company's key principles. Then he followed up (in private) with a personal apology to each person who had felt slandered by Rodger's remarks. He thanked his peers for their forgiveness.

**The positive:** Rodger posted the company principles in his office and began to hold himself accountable to each one. He was particularly interested in those principles that dealt with customer satisfaction, teamwork and communication. In short, Rodger determined to be a better leader.

**Future:** After some time, Rodger's game plan paid off. He was recognized by his peers for his new approach at the next offsite summit. Rodger's diligent efforts ultimately resulted in a promotion. Rodger has stopped dodging the tough conversations with his peers. Is that something you need to consider? ♦

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