

## **What a Rescue Dog's Story Reminded Me about the Power of Communication**

### ***How a Friend's Dog became an Unexpected Rescue Dog***

Many times the lessons we learn that can apply to our professional lives are taught through personal experiences. This past Christmas weekend, a close friend I've known for more than 20 years died from lung and ovarian cancer. There are many lessons and experiences I've shared with her over the years. She and I followed compatible career paths and collaborated on more than one occasion. I can recall more than a few shared lessons we've learned about organizational communication and leadership influence.

Sometimes it's the simple life moments that make the most profound impact. When my friend became aware that she was not going to go home again, she reached out to another long-time friend to commit to caring for her dog (Stanley). She was asking him to care for a pet that she loved and had rescued as a puppy. I believe that when he agreed to take Stanley, it was her understanding that he had promised to ensure a permanent home.

Something went wrong with that arrangement. Within a month after my friend had died, I learned that the man didn't like Stanley and wanted to give him away. Another mutual friend and I communicated that we would find him a home and had begun actively seeking a new arrangement. Two days later, I saw through a random social media post that Stanley was at a kill shelter. Fortunately, we were able to intervene and get Stanley out of the shelter and to a loving home.

As I look back on the experience, I am bewildered as to why anyone would send a healthy four-year-old dog to a kill shelter. I am especially judgmental about doing so after making a commitment of care to a dying friend.

The curious nature in me also seeks business lessons in the experience. My primary take-aways are to focus on the causes of miscommunication and the principles that create shared understanding and clarity.

***Here are three Powerful Communication Lessons I learned from Stanley's kill shelter experience—and how they also apply in our professional lives:***

#### **1.) Communicate Clear Expectations**

When we communicate, especially when we are seeking to influence others to do something, we must be clear and specific. In the case of my friend who asked her pal to take care of her dog, I do not know if she thought the dog would stay with him indefinitely or if she anticipated he might find another home. What I do know, from

knowing her well and understanding how she felt about her dog, was that she expected her pet to be safe. If she didn't communicate clearly about what that meant to her—and what she was really asking of the man—there may have been some misunderstanding about what he was agreeing to do.

Clear expectations are important because others must understand what we want before they can act on those wishes. In the work place, vague directives can leave people with too much guesswork about the level, quality, deadline and results that are expected. It can feel tedious (or even condescending) to include specifics. Yet the alternative to clearly communicating can leave you with frustration, inefficient work and duplicative efforts. When dealing with newer workers who are still learning, unclear communication can also inhibit their ability to contribute quickly and grow with the job. Take the time to respectfully and completely convey what you want done, by when, and for what goal or purpose. Clear expectations empower people and improve outcomes.

## **2.) Do Not Assume Shared Values or Goals**

The assumptions we make about whether others share our values and goals often indicate why we fail to clearly communicate our expectations. As I stated earlier, when my friend entrusted her dog to someone, I understood that to mean she expected him to ensure the dog had a permanent home. Her values around pets included her notion that a pet should be cared for its entire life; and to find another home when no longer able to do that. It wasn't in her frame of reference to choose to take a pet to a kill shelter rather find a permanent home elsewhere. She may have assumed that her friend shared those values, or at least respected that she had those values, and that he would act the same way she would.

The same type of miscommunication can interfere with our ability to set clear expectations at work. When leaders fail to convey goals (frequently and repetitively) or model a company's stated values; then there is no reason to assume employees will understand what the goals and values are. We cannot assume shared understanding or support of goals and values without first clearly expressing and repeating what those things are.

## **3.) People Expect Your Words and Actions to Align**

This one sounds like a no-brainer every time it comes to mind. Yet in our heavily distracted world where we continue to think we're successfully multi-tasking, there are continual examples of people seeming to do things differently than they said they would. It sure seems to me that's what happened with my friend and her dog. I sat in a hospital room and witnessed my friend thanking that man for taking Stanley and making sure he was safe. I watched the man say she was welcome for his help. On that day, I would have told you I witnessed a promise between two friends that when the one friend died, the other would ensure her dog was safe and had a home. There were a few other friends in our circle who believed the same thing. We all expected his actions to follow those words. Within five weeks though, he had dumped the dog in a kill shelter. We definitely viewed that as a very different thing than what he'd seemingly promised our mutual

friend. His actions betrayed his words, and it created an impression of him lacking integrity.

I've seen this at work too, and it leaves a negative feeling whether it was intended or not. It can happen easily:

- A leader promises to follow-up on a conversation and then gets too distracted and forgets.
- A manager commits to an open-door policy and then finds herself unavailable most of the day due to over-commitment or lack of time management.
- A co-worker repeatedly commits to completing something in one day and cannot get it done in less than three days.

In any of these types of cases, though not intended, someone often feels betrayed. Then trust or reputation is diminished. People expect words and actions to align, especially among those they report to or depend on for something

## **In Conclusion**

Stanley's story has a happy dog ending. We found him a new home with a great family. I am now sure, however, that many pets are needlessly sent to kill shelters when other solutions are readily available. I remain just as certain that my late friend never would have expected that a friend she trusted would have done so with her dog (If you have pets, plan ahead for their needs should something happen to you).

While miscommunication allowed a negative outcome, it was **clear communication** among other friends that **turned it into a positive**. We stayed in touch and were thus able to react in time.

The true **power of communication** lies in our understanding of and ability to connect with others—and it's one of the most important leadership skills we have.