Reducing Communication Confusion

Leaders often confuse followers by communicating imperatives as declarative statements. An imperative is a command. An imperative sentence has a grammatical structure expressing a directive. A declarative sentence is quite different; it makes a statement. In an effort to sound less forceful, leaders will often make declarative statements and expect followers to recognize them as imperatives.

Sometimes this tactic works. For instance, the garbage stinks is a declarative statement that—when spoken by my wife—becomes an obvious imperative, take out the garbage! Most of the time, however, imperatives disguised as declarative statements simply generate confusion.

I understand why leaders use declarative statements when they really want to communicate imperatives. Imperatives can sound harsh. Declarative statements have a softer tone; they are also terribly confusing. Imperatives direct an individual to a specific action (fix the leak), but declarative statements make the problem the subject without any prescribed action (the faucet leaks).

When leaders communicate imperatives as declarative statements they make two critical errors. First, they communicate a problem without a prescribed solution. Second, they do not assign a person (the subject) to the problem or project. So everyone now realizes the faucet leaks, but no one knows who should fix it and how it should be fixed.

The confusion caused by this communication error makes a leader appear unnecessarily weak. In an attempt to be considerate, leaders just come off as confusing. We already knew the faucet leaked. Who should fix it? Sentence structure may seem like an inconsequential part of leadership, but imperatives are important because they direct people to action.

If you want followers to act on a problem, then don't use a declarative sentence. It's confusing and a weak form of communication. Unless, of course, you are my wife. The garbage stinks. I get it.