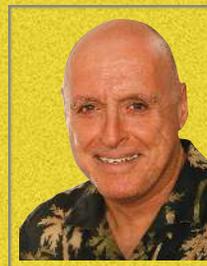


# THE EXTRA POINT

BY JERRY ROBERTS



## # 448 Creating a More Effective Environment to Communicate

If you're a manager, and I'm referring to managers at every level, do you ever give thought to where you interact with your team and the power factors involved? I'm Jerry Roberts and today we look at a topic most of us rarely focus on. It's next on The Extra Point.

For the majority of my career when I was called into a manager or owner's office to discuss a problem, or explain a position, or — on rare occasions though it did happen — to bark at me for something they took issue with.

I was facing an authority figure who was sitting behind a big desk. I only later discovered this was construed to be a power thing. They made it clear they had the power, I didn't.

Early on all offices seemed the same. The big desk for the boss, with two chairs on the other side. I had the idea it was some kind of requirement until I had the chance to deliver something to the CEO of the company I worked for while going to college. It was a big space and the man had a nice desk but, strangely, no chairs next to it. The central focus of his office was a seating arrangement that looked like it came out of someone's living room. Four comfortable chairs around a small table.

I commented to my boss about it and he told me that was the CEO's effort to put people at ease, not to have any large barriers between him and those who came to his office. It was then I first learned about the psychology behind the environment in which we interact with people.

Is there a power bias when we bring somebody into our office. Yes. Is some of that neutralized when we meet in, say, a company conference room? Yes, although there are power issues in a conference room as well. Here's an example. Do you, the manager, normally occupy a seat at the head of the

table and conduct meetings from that position? If so, I don't want to sit there if the goal is to put somebody at ease so they open up in conversation. I'll sit next to them at the other end of the table.

If you're meeting as a group in a restaurant I'd grab a seat in the middle of the table. If you don't it's likely the team will leave that head seat open for you out of habit.

We are creatures of habit. At a staff meeting we'll likely sit in the same seat each time. If you attend church, do you sit in the same place for every worship service? Does it feel strange if you have to move? If you're the one in charge of the meeting, change your location each time and see the effect it has on other participants.

When you're dealing with conflict between workers, I advise that you always seek to set up a neutral zone to hear both sides. There should be no rank in the meeting, no power being displayed in any way. If anything, you act as the mediator, without taking sides. The star of the show is the issue at hand. The only thing you're there to do is solve a problem.

The first step to doing that is making sure all the parties involved feeling totally comfortable and ready to contribute ideas. Your role is to put the disagreement on the table. Everybody is free to ask questions, challenge assertions, and raise awareness. My only question is this: am I facilitating an open environment that helps everyone feel that freedom.

That's The Extra Point. Get out there and make something good happen today. For 93.3 and the Ray Gibson Show, I'm Jerry Roberts.

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