

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS

Repairing Damaged Relationships ▶ 02/22/07

For the third session in a row I was hearing all about Stephanie. Carl, whom I'd been coaching for several months, just couldn't contain himself about her. "The only reason she didn't forward that email to me was so I would go into the staff meeting looking like an idiot."

"Whoa," I said, holding up my hand like a traffic cop, "you don't know that. That story is completely made up."

"You don't know her," he shot back. "She's always playing one-up. And not just with me. She even pulled one of these stunts with Mike." Mike was the division head. "He called her on it in front of everyone and she tried to explain it away! She wouldn't even own it!"

Carl was absolutely convinced he was right: Stephanie was a villain. Not only were her actions evil, her intentions were evil, too. And Carl was her poor hapless victim. That was Carl's story at any rate.

Feeling victimized is powerful. Self-righteousness is exhilarating. When we feel we've been wronged, we search out the sympathetic ears that will cement us in our rightness. Oh, golly, it feels good.

And it's all self-deception.

Here's a simple truth. In the history of human conflicts, there has never been a situation where one side was entirely in the right.

I spoke that truth to Carl once he slowed down. Convinced of his rightness, he glossed over my message. "Oh, sure, I know that," he said dismissively, "but that still doesn't excuse the fact that she . . ." and we were back to the litany of complaints about Stephanie.

Over and over people ask for my help managing difficult relationships. When I probe what sort of help they'd like, I find out they want a communication tool that will get the other person to see the errors of their stupid, stubborn ways! Wishing for a magical outcome, while fundamentally human, keeps unproductive relationships stuck.



The question I asked Carl at this point is the same question to ask yourself if you have a relationship you wish were better: “How am I contributing to this situation?”

The temptation will be to focus on what the other person is doing on *their* side to contribute to the poor state of the relationship. But be rigorous. Stay focused on you and what you’re doing. That’s what you can control. Let go of being “right” and move to make things better.

If it’s not apparent how you’re keeping the relationship stuck, examine your beliefs about the other person. Most likely, you’ve made up a lot of stories about them. Do you imagine you have insight into their thinking and their motivations? Well, that insight is bunk. You don’t have a clue why they’re doing anything. I promise.

The very fact that you think you can mind-read them is one key way you’re contributing to the poor state of the relationship!

Carl fervently believed he knew why Stephanie hadn’t forwarded that email to him. And that belief made him unable to have a productive conversation with Stephanie.

If you want to make any relationship better, at work or at home, the very first action is to ask, “How am I contributing?”

Once you get some traction with “How am I contributing?” you’ll be ready to think about the tool called *Smoothing Harsh Edges*.

Of course it would be great if other people would ask themselves how *they’re* contributing—because of course they are; nothing is ever one-sided. But whether they do or don’t is out of your control. Your thoughts and actions are the only things you can control. Listen for the stories you tell yourself about how guiltless you are or the ways you’ve been victimized. They’re just that: stories.

And since every story cries out for a good villain, it’s tough sometimes to let the other person just be a person. It’s tough to focus on you. Try it and see.

Read a related Tip:

[*Choosing Stories Over “Truth”*](#)



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