

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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TELE 818.788.5357
info@essentialcomm.com
www.essentialcomm.com

EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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A Difficult Conversation ▶ 04/16/09

An inquiry via email

In response to last month's Executive Coaching Tip, I got the following email from a guy named Guy:

My boss constantly corrects me and undermines me in meetings. It's not that she says I'm wrong, exactly, but she makes it clear we have different styles and that my style is worse than hers. How do I approach her about this?

Guy's situation feels like many others I've coached, so my five-step recommendation to him is this month's Coaching Tip. I wrote:

Five steps to follow

I'm sorry this is happening, Guy. I'm encouraged that I don't hear you wanting to make her stop or change her—a good thing since we can't change anyone but ourselves.

How to approach her about this? Here are five steps to help you do this as smoothly as possible.

1 Gather good data

You say your boss "constantly corrects me." Really? Constantly? I doubt that. When exactly does her correcting behavior happen? What does she actually say? How does she "undermine" you? Don't trust your memory or your feelings. Write it down. Don't inflate or exaggerate what happens. Be as accurate as possible.

You might also gather data from others. Don't influence people by asking loaded questions like, "Did you see how she undermined me in that meeting?" That's not helpful.

Rather, ask neutral questions: "My boss and I are talking about how we treat each other in meetings. What do our interactions look like to you?"

2 Rehearse with someone you trust

Don't wing this conversation with your boss: rehearsal improves performance, especially when stakes



are high and emotions may cloud judgment. Malcolm Gladwell, in his best-selling book, *Blink*, shows how rehearsal helped police officers lower their heart rate in dangerous situations. See Chapter Six, Section 7: "Something in My Mind Just Told Me I Didn't Have to Shoot Yet." Fascinating. And beyond dispute.

Rehearse with someone you trust. Explain the situation as best you can. Then have your partner be you and you be your boss. Try to listen and react the way you think she would. Rehearsing a difficult situation as the other person is extraordinarily helpful.

Then, switch roles and be yourself and rehearse again. I guarantee you'll have gained some insights that will improve your performance.

During this second rehearsal, have your partner listen for three behaviors (items 3 – 5).

3 Avoid blaming language

"You correct me in meetings" is a blaming statement.

Instead of telling her about her behavior, talk about your experience. For example: "In the meeting yesterday, I heard you say 'xyz.'"

She might disagree with your report but you can't be "wrong." Your experience is your experience and it's valid. This is another reason to [be impeccable with your word](#) and report as accurately as possible.

"It seemed you were trying to undermine me" is another blaming statement. Why? Because you're guessing (making accusations) about her intentions. You don't know anything about her intentions.

The solution once again is to talk about your experience: "When you said 'xyz,' I felt undermined." It's okay to name your feelings. There's no blame in having had a feeling. Here again, she may not agree, or even understand, but you can't be wrong: your feelings are your feelings. Period.

(The difference between reporting your experience versus making blaming statements is often a difficult concept to grasp. If this doesn't make sense, please write me.)

4 Share your feelings without accusation

Reading your email, Guy, I sense you want to say, "My boss makes me feel undermined." In other words, you sense you're feeling the way you feel because of what she did to you.



That's understandable, but there's a flaw in that thinking. In truth, Guy, no one can "make" you feel anything. I think we all have said at one time or another, "You make me angry." But that's an impossibility. Your feelings are yours. No one can *make* you feel anything.

Be willing to own that you have feelings that might have *nothing to do with her intention*.

5 Talk tentatively and encourage testing

When we want people to hear potentially uncomfortable information, most of us square our shoulders and "tell it like it is." We say things like, "It's obvious that..." Or "The fact is..." Or "Everyone knows..." To make our point, we get overly assertive. And the other person gets defensive. Rightly so!

But evidence shows that if you can express yourself with a combination of humility and confidence, the other person is more likely to consider your idea. (This concept is explained well in the essential book, *Crucial Conversations*, Chapter 7.)

Use phrases like, "I wonder if..." "Maybe you're unaware..." "My experience has been..."

Then encourage your boss to test your ideas. "How does that sound to you?" "I wonder what you're thinking."

Put it all together

So when you put #3, 4 and 5 together, it will sound something like this:

"In the meeting yesterday, I heard you say 'xyz.' When you said that, I felt undermined. I don't know how that sounds to you. I'm wondering if you can understand my feelings."

Then, stop talking and see what she has to say. If she responds defensively, stay calm. You can reply with a contrasting statement.

A contrasting statement in this situation might sound like this:

"It wasn't my intention to accuse you of anything. I just wanted to let you know how I felt."

People change slowly. She may continue to make similar "correcting" comments. And you may continue to feel undermined. That's normal. Be prepared to revisit the conversation.



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