

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS

Handling Defensive Behaviors ▶ 08/22/07

Ramesh is blessed with a blend of technical genius and emotional intelligence. He is patient and smart and insightful. He's also conflict-averse. Repeatedly, he found himself backing away from holding Loren, one of his technology officers, accountable.

"He's explosive and irrational," Ramesh said to me. "And I ought to know. He's an old friend. He's always been this way."

"So what would be a good outcome?" I asked.

He thought for a minute, then smiled. "I don't suppose we could get him to change, could we?"

I laughed. "Maybe. But this is your coaching. What do you want for yourself?"

He pondered for a minute, then said quietly, "What I'd really like is to be able to hold my ground when he explodes."

Standing your ground in the face of defensive behaviors is extremely difficult. Research has proven that emotions are as contagious as the flu—only with no incubation period. When one person gets angry and defensive, the other person does, too. In no time at all, both people are dug into their trenches, defending their positions, deaf to any reason if reason is present at all!

Ramesh and I role-played the situation so he could learn to inoculate himself against Loren's emotion. (I got the fun role of Ramesh's explosive, irrational direct report.) Over and over, I coached Ramesh on three tools. By keeping these three tools in the front of his mind, he found he could not only hold his ground, but could stay calm in the face of my onslaught.

The three tools to manage yourself:

- 1 State your core issue simply and directly using "I" statements. (For a quick primer on "I" statements, see [Speaking for Yourself](#).)
- 2 Observe and reflect how you experience the other person.
- 3 State both what your intention is in having this discussion and what your intention is not.



For any of these three tools to be effective, you have to do some preparation. For example, you have to figure out what your core issue really is and how to state it simply, with “I” statements. That’s not easy.

You also need to be able to articulate your experience of the other person. Saying this out loud often feels very personal, so it may need a good deal of practice. And, perhaps most important, you need to be really clear why you want to have this conversation. What’s your intention? Really.

After much practice, here’s how our final role-play sounded:

RAMESH: I really appreciate you getting those reports to me. Thanks. *(Beginning with genuine appreciation.)* You know, Loren, what would be even more helpful for me is if the reports were formatted differently. What I’d prefer to see would be . . . *(Attempting to state the the core issue with an “I” statement.)*

LOREN: *(Very defensively)* You asked me to chart the work in my group and I did!

RAMESH: Yes, you did, and I appreciate it. What I want is different data. *(Again attempting to state the core issue simply and clearly using “I” statements. And no use of the word “but”!)*

LOREN: *(More emotional, defensive behavior)* But I’m doing what you asked for!

RAMESH: I see that this is upsetting you. *(Calmly observing and reflecting his real-time experience of Loren.)*

LOREN: Well, yeah! First you tell me my team isn’t effective so you want me to give you weekly reports. Now you tell me my reports aren’t good enough. Of course I’m upset! What’s next? You don’t like the way I park!?

RAMESH: Loren, it’s not my intention to upset you. My intention is for us all to be doing our best for the company. *(Stating what his intention is and what his intention is not.)*

LOREN: *(Calming a bit.)* Well, it sure doesn’t feel that way to me.

RAMESH: I see that. I completely understand why you might feel that way. *(This is not agreement or permission—it’s just acknowledging that Loren’s feelings are real.)* So I want to assure you



this is not a personal attack, Loren. I am asking for different data because it will help me make good decisions for the company. *(Restating his intention in order to get back to the core issue)* I'd like to lay it out for you specifically. Can you look at this with me?

When Ramesh finally had his actual conversation with Loren, it went fairly well. And he got the result he wanted—reformatted reports. Ramesh told me our repeated rehearsals allowed him to get through the experience calmly and to stay on track. He was able to keep the three tools in mind and cycle through them as needed. Ramesh felt his own calm helped defuse Loren. And that's true: emotions are infectious in both directions.

Going into an emotional situation is like running into a burning building: it's not for the faint of heart or the untrained. Firefighters rehearse and rehearse and rehearse so that when they face real flames and every instinct in their body screams for them to run away, they can manage themselves by remembering what they were taught.

When you are faced with defensive behaviors, reflect deeply on the three tools above. Then practice out loud over and over—with a partner if possible. Mastering the tools is powerful medicine against infection.

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