



The Look & Sound *of* Leadership™ SINCE 1990 *Executive Coaching Tips*

THE HUMAN ELEMENT

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At work, we often diminish the importance of feelings – our own or those of others. We think, “I don’t have time for that” or “That’s silly.” But feelings don’t disappear just because they’re inconvenient. And, when unacknowledged, their impact can be severe. This month, two coaches discuss the difficulties of managing “the human element.”

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Not tuned in

My friend and colleague, [Mindy Danna](#), and I were talking about our coaching practices. So much of our work revolves around thinking deeply about the people we coach, it’s helpful to have a thought partner.

For months I had been telling her about Nate, an executive at one of the studios who was a creative star. Hiring him had been a coup for the studio and they wanted to groom him into a fantastic executive. Among the tools they were giving him was a coach, who happened to be me.

Mindy had become enthralled with my portrait of this corporate star speeding down the highway of leadership success.

Of my most recent meeting with Nate, I told her, “As we’re sitting down, he mentioned that his whole department – 70-some people – is moving to a new building at the end of the month. And he kept on talking. I went, ‘Whoa! Hold on! You’re moving?’”

“He was minimizing it?” she asked, knowingly.



“Yes. But I knew that a move had to be a big deal. The building they’re in now is a legacy building. People love working in that building because of its history. When I heard they were moving, I asked him, ‘Aren’t people upset?’”

“And are they?” she asked.

“Oh, of course! It’s not as bad as it could be – the new space is still a studio building – but it’s newer and completely different. Even the space among the artists is going to be different.”

“And he wasn’t tuned into that as an issue?” Given the glowing portrait I’d painted of Nate, her surprise was understandable.

“As soon as we started talking about it, yes, he saw that people *must* be upset and that he’d better deal with it. He began throwing out this idea and that idea. He just hadn’t stopped to give it real thought.”

She toasted with an imaginary glass. “Thank you very much, coaching conversations!”

Defining “The Human Element”

We both knew this was one benefit our clients got from their time with us: they got time to think about things they otherwise wouldn’t.

“One thing I love about Nate,” I said, “is how fast he is. We only talked for maybe fifteen minutes, and he thought of probably a dozen actions he can take that will make a real impact.”

“Like what?” she asked.

“For example, he’s going to start a legacy group to think about what really belongs to them, that they can take with them.”

“How cool!” Mindy said.

“Isn’t it? And that idea just popped out of his brain in an instant. It took him no effort at all.”



“I think it’s the human element,” she said. I gave a questioning look. She explained, “He seems not to have seen that people were having feelings about the move. And, that unless those feelings – whatever they are – get addressed in some way, they often become their own issue.” Then, with a smile, she asked, “Did I ever tell you about my heart attack guy?”

“Don’t think so,” I said.

“This was a guy named Joe. Senior vice president at a consumer goods company. Only sixty or so, but not in great shape. He’s over-weight, has back problems, his eyes get tired easily. It’s exhausting being Joe everyday. But the company loves Joe because he knows their supply chain like nobody else.

“Well, I’m coaching Joe because for six months or so, he’s been a basket case. Forgetful, cranky, goofy in his communication. All my interviews about him said the same thing: we love him, but he’s a mess. And he hadn’t been previously.

“So it’s maybe our third session and in the middle of some story or other, he says, ‘I’m not exactly sure how that went down. That happened during my heart attack.’ So I asked him about it.

“It turns out that about a year and a half earlier, he keeled over at one of his granddaughter’s birthday parties. Everybody freaks out. Ambulance comes. They rush him to the hospital. Put in a stent and, bang, he’s fine. Better than ever. Could’ve died but didn’t, so let’s get back to work. Six days later he was back at his desk and never thought of it again. So he said.

“I asked him if he thought, gee, maybe, might his heart attack have possibly anything to do with his current slump in performance? He said, no, that was months before. Done. Over. No possible connection.

“Of course, to me, this is the human element. I believe he had to have strong feelings about a near-death experience, and those feelings are going to show up at some point, in some way.”

I said, “Sounds like he didn’t even think he had feelings.”

“Right! He was not tuned in to his own human element. At one point, he conceded that, yes, well, ok,



there was that one day he'd felt really scared. But he didn't think his slump had anything to do with fear!"

"To which you said?"

The wisdom of others

"What does fear look like? I said it could look like anything. Just like anger can look like iciness."

I nodded and chimed in, "Or shame can look like bullying."

She laughed. "Or good old confusion can lead to being a control freak. I remember one time my husband changed firms. I was in a tizzy and started micromanaging the girls and him and the dogs. No one else seemed upset about his move, but for some reason I was."

I said, "I'm thinking about Nate. In his case, I don't think he was the one with strong feelings. I think a lot of people in the department had strong feelings, but not him."

"So did you make this a point with him?" she asked.

"Make what a point?"

"This human element. That when feelings are present, whether they're yours or someone else's, they need to be acknowledged?"

"I didn't have to. He did it himself. In the middle of thinking how to calm the waters, he stopped and observed exactly that. He said, 'I should've seen this. I have to slow down and notice people.' He got it."

"Well, he got it thanks to you pointing it out. Lucky he had a coach."

"Or you can have a good lieutenant."

"Or a best friend who'll kick your ass."

I said, "There's this woman I coach. Her assistant does that for her. She'll say, 'Margot, pay attention



to this thing over here.' Or 'Margot, folks are grumbling.' This assistant is totally tuned in to the human element in their workplace and she makes sure Margot tunes in, too."

"Am I right? Do people like Margot?" she asked.

"They do. And she's lucky because, left on her own, she would probably be clueless to that human element stuff. Like your heart attack guy."

"Well, no, she clearly knows that feelings really do show up in the workplace. And she knows how to honor them."

"When someone points them out to her!"

"But she listens!"

I cocked my head, thinking. "I'm remembering a time this whole human element thing completely overwhelmed me."

"When was that?"

"After my brother died," I said.

Invisible forest in the midst of trees

Mindy had heard about my brother's death. I'd been in my mid-thirties; he wasn't even forty. She knew it'd had a huge impact on me.

"I think I was in a funk for probably three years afterwards. And I kept thinking to myself, 'I've never done this grief thing. I wonder what it's going to be like when it finally kicks in.' And of course, I was in the middle of it! I couldn't see it even though I was looking for it."

"And nobody in your life was your lieutenant?" she asked.

"Maybe. I was so overwhelmed, I'm not sure I remember it very well."



“Did you talk about it?” she asked.

“About this grief thing?”

“No. If I had asked five or ten people in your life, ‘Hey, did you hear about Tom’s brother,’ would they have all said yes?”

I considered again. “I’m not sure. I can imagine it either way. Why?”

“Well, I think it’s like Nate. Or like my guy Joe with the heart attack. Talking about your feelings makes you stop and focus on them. And then, sometimes, you can take action on their impact.”

“I do think I talked about grief. I wondered how it was changing me.”

“That’s important. You expected them to be a factor. You were looking for your human element.”

“I suppose,” I said.

Whack-a-mole of feelings

She shook her head in wonder. “I’m really struck by the idea that everything is connected. For example, people in Nate’s building are upset about the move. So who knows what happens next. Maybe productivity goes down. Or bad decisions get made about the new space. Whatever it is, *something* is going to go badly if Nate doesn’t pay attention to this swirl of feelings.

“And Joe,” she continued. “He has a heart attack and, even though he has a near-death experience and his whole family is traumatized, he thinks everything goes back to normal. No! Everyone had feelings about what happened.”

“Even him!”

“Which he didn’t want to admit, thank you very much. But, because everything connects, the feelings are going to show up somewhere somehow. For the longest time, Joe simply did not want that to be true.”



“Did you finally convince him?”

She laughed. “No, he convinced himself. I mentioned he was a supply chain guy, right? Well, one day he was explaining something about supply chain and he said, ‘If you change something at the beginning, you have to follow it down the line because it’s going to show up somewhere.’”

“No!”

“Yes! And he heard himself say that. He made the connection all by himself. It was like he had a conversion. Suddenly he was willing to consider that his slump might be connected to his heart attack. And he started talking about how freaked out his family had been. Suddenly we were having this incredibly compassionate conversation about trauma. It was great.”

I mused. “So what’s the real point here?”

“Well, one point is about feelings. It’s what I listen for with my clients: where are the feelings. About a project. About a person. Maybe they’re my client’s feelings. Maybe they’re other people’s feelings. And when I hear feelings, I wonder where they’re going to pop out.”

I laughed. “Sounds like whack-a-mole.”

“It does! Which is not a bad image. We’re human. We have feelings. They’re going to show up somewhere.”

“But wait! We’re not really trying to whack our feelings, are we? We’re not trying to pound them into submission and make them disappear.”

“True. No, what we really want to do is what Nate did. Stop. Recognize they’re there. Figure out what they are. Why are they happening? And what can we, as leaders, do to manage them and make them productive?”

I shook my head admiringly. “That would be *The Look & Sound of Leadership*.”



Core Concepts:

- Feelings are ever-present in the workplace
- When feelings are strong – which is not a bad thing! – assume they will have an impact
- Unacknowledged feelings will likely have a negative impact
- If you aren't sure how to acknowledge the feelings around you (or your own!), enlist someone more comfortable in the realm of "The Human Element"

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