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THE VOICE OF AUTHORITY

TOM HENSCHHEL

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Authority is a slip-sliding sort of thing. Do we get it automatically along with a title? Sometimes. But sometimes not. This month's coaching conversation examines both the thoughts and the words that give us authority.

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Authority and need

Sandra was worried about her authority. As an individual contributor she'd been a standout; now she was going to lead a team, and she wanted to be a great team leader. She was grateful for the opportunity to discuss her worries with a coach. Authority was our topic of the day.

"I like these people," she said. "We've all known each other a long time. So I don't know where I get my authority from."

"That's an interesting question," I said. "Where *do* you get your authority from?"

She considered, then gave an uncomfortable shrug. "Because I'm the boss? Because I have the job and they don't?" She squirmed, clearly uncomfortable.

I laughed. "Spoken with authority!"

She laughed, too. "Hard-ly!"



“Well, if not authority,” I said, “at least reality. That *is* the reality, Sandra. You have the title and they don’t. That may not give you authority with everyone, but it will with most.”

“But what do I say when I think someone could be working harder? Or I want more transparency? Or if I think someone is using excuses? Reality only gets me so far.”

“What’s your concern?” I asked.

“What do I say in a situation like that?” she asked.

“What do you *want* to say?”

She slowed down, thinking as she spoke. “I guess I want to say, ‘You need to work harder.’ Or, ‘You need to tell me when those things happen.’ Or, ‘You need to be straight with me.’”

“And that would have authority?” I asked.

She seemed satisfied and a little surprised. “Yes. I guess it does!”

“Can I ask a question?” I asked.

“Sure!”

“You said, ‘You need to be straight with me.’ What does ‘need’ mean? They ‘need’ to. Is that like a food-and-water kind of need?”

“Well, no, not that kind of need,” she said. “But, you know, they *need* to.”

“Because?”

“Oh! Why? Gosh, here we are again. Because I’m the boss and I’m telling them what to do?” She asked it as a question.

“So they need to do what you say?” I asked her back.



“Well, don’t they?” She was becoming unsure.

“I don’t know. Suppose they don’t do it. What then?”

Point in the other direction

“Yes! Right!” She threw up her hands. “That’s where my authority falls apart. I don’t know ‘what then.’ How do I get out of that corner?”

“How would it be if you took the word ‘need’ out all together?”

She reformulated in her head, then said, “OK. ‘You *have* to be straight with me.’ No, that can’t be right. That’s the same thing as *need*, isn’t it? Uh – I don’t know.”

“Can I suggest you turn it all around? Right now, it’s all pointing at them.” I pointed a finger at an imaginary person. “‘*You have to this,*’ and ‘*you need to do that.*’ Could you turn it around so that ‘you need to be straight with me’ becomes about yourself?”

She shrugged. “‘*I need you to be straight with me?*’”

I smiled, not sure if she was joking. “Try it without ‘need’,” I reminded her.

“Right. Sorry. At least I got the part right about it being about me,” she smiled.

“Actually, you didn’t,” I said. I pointed again. “‘You need to be straight with me’ and ‘I need you to be straight with me’ are the pretty much the same thing, don’t you think? The focus is still on the other person.”

She considered before finally conceding the point with a nod. Then, as if reciting rules, she said, “So this has to be about me. And I can’t use the word ‘need’.” She looked away, then back, saying, “How about this? ‘I don’t think you’re being straight with me.’ Ew, no. Talk about pointing a finger! Could I be more blaming? Let me try again.”

She closed her eyes a second. Then they popped open.



Authority and want

She said, “‘I want.’ That has to be the answer.”

I smiled that she thought there was *an* answer.

Very slowly, listening to herself, she said, “‘I want you to be straight with me.’ That doesn’t use the word ‘need’ and it certainly is all about me. ‘I want you to be this, that, or the other.’ Straight. Simple. Boom.”

“You like it,” I observed.

“I do. It sounds a little weird, but, yes, I like it.”

“A little weird?” I asked.

She looked right at me. “Selfish. It sounds selfish.”

“Does it? How?”

“Because it really is all about me. ‘I want this’ and ‘I want that.’ Is that going to get me authority? By demanding what I want?”

“Who said anything about demanding?” I asked.

She only stopped a second before saying, “But isn’t saying ‘I want you to be straight with me’ demanding by its very nature? I think so!”

“I think the demand is in the delivery,” I said. “If I came to you in the spirit of conversation, and said I’d like to talk about how we are communicating, and, with no accusation, but with interest and curiosity, said, ‘I want you to be straight with me. And want to tell you why being straight is on my mind,’ would that sound demanding to you?”

“I guess not. But it’s hard to ask for what you want like that.”

“Amen!” I laughed.



She shook her head with a fond smile. “This is just like me and my sister. We fight for control. When we’re saying, ‘You *have* to do this for Mom’ or ‘You *need* to call the insurance company,’ it’s always a fight. But when either one of us can just say, ‘I really want you to make that call,’ it’s so much easier. I don’t know why it’s so hard to ask for what you want.”

“I think you hit it when you said that thing about being selfish. Asking for what you want sounds selfish to a lot of people.”

“You don’t think it’s just a girl thing?” she asked.

“I think women worry about it out loud more than men, but I don’t think men are any better at talking this way.”

“And what is ‘this way’?” she asked.

“Asking for what you want. Simply. Directly. Without a battle. Asking for what you want is one way we gain authority. And, no, I don’t experience men as inherently better at it than women.”

“Wait! That’s *one* way to gain authority? What’s another?” she asked.

I took a breath, framing it up. “I think there’s *mindset* and there’s *construction*. In other words, there’s how you *think* about authority and how you *communicate* your authority.”

“OK, start with *mindset*,” she said.

Authority’s mindset

“OK. There’s one mindset that thinks authority just is. You have to do what I say just because.”

She smiled a little sheepishly. “That would be me saying ‘you *need* to do such and such.’ Or ‘I *need* you to be transparent with me,’ right?”

“Right,” I agreed, smiling back.



“And let me guess. This is not the right mindset.”

“Whether it’s right or not, plenty of people have it!”

“Like me!” she laughed. Then, “Sorry to be slow on the uptake but, that’s a bad mindset because...?”

“Because it’s not reality, Sandra. People *don’t* have to do what you say just because you’re the boss. There are a million ways to not comply. So thinking ‘what I says goes’ does not give you authority.”

“Then what would be a *good* mindset?”

“Accepting that people do things for their own reasons. So all I can do is ask. ‘Here’s what I want. I hope you do it.’”

“Or what?” she asked seriously.

“I may not know at the moment. But when the time comes, I’ll have choices. You have choices, and so do I. That’s not an arms race against an enemy. It’s just true. We both are grown ups and we both make choices. I won’t take yours personally. And I hope you won’t take mine personally – whatever they are.”

“Yikes,” she laughed, fanning her face with her hand. “No wonder I have trouble with my authority! I can barely do that with my kid! OK. So ‘don’t take it personally’ is the mindset, right?”

“That, and that we all get to make our own choices,” I said.

“OK. Then what’s the construction?”

Authority’s construction

“It builds on the ‘I want’ idea you had before. It’s a clear, unambiguous statement about your thinking.”

“For example?”

I rattled off three. “‘Hard work is a big value of mine.’ Or ‘I want to hear about those sort of things when



they happen.' Or 'I want you to be straight with me.'"

"Are these the dreaded 'I statements' I've always heard about but never seen in the wild?"

I laughed. "Sure, you could call them 'I statements'."

"Say them again."

I ticked them on my fingers. "'Hard work is a big value of mine.' 'I want to hear about those sort of things when they happen.' 'I want you to be straight with me.'"

"Hey, that first one didn't have the word 'I' in it!" she protested.

"Doesn't have to. It's still an 'I statement.' An 'I statement' is constructed from your thinking. Sometimes that's a want. Sometimes that's an idea. Sometimes that's a vision. But it's yours. And you're not ambiguous about it."

"No waffling." I nodded yes to her and she asked, "And waffling sounds like?"

"Qualifying."

"Which sounds like?"

I laughed a little, then, making an I'm-sorry-to-mention-this face, launched into my rendition of qualifying speech. "You know, there's something I've kind of been thinking about a little. It's not a big deal, but, you know, there's something I want to ask. And we can talk about it if you like. I really want to hear your ideas about it and..." I stopped, dropping the act. "Oh, golly, Sandra, I hear people qualify for paragraphs before they get to their 'I statement.' By which time it doesn't matter."

"Well, I don't think that's my issue," she said.

"I agree, Sandra. I don't think qualifying speech is your issue."



Now it was her turn to tick on her fingers. “So the construction part of authority – how I *sound* – is ‘I statements’ and asking for what I want. Simple and direct. And the mindset part – how I *think* about authority – is that I don’t really have any authority at all. All I have is choices. Same for you. And I won’t take yours personally.”

“Wow, Sandra,” I said, “that was way better than I could have said it.”

She cocked her head and smiled. “Well, maybe not all the time, but some of the time I can do *The Look & Sound of Leadership*.”

Core Concepts:

MINDSETS that promote authority:

- Authority is not a given; people do *not* have to do what you say
- You have a wide array of choices
- View the choices of others as moves on a chess board viewed from a balcony; don’t take anything personally

CONSTRUCTIONS that promote authority:

- Simple, direct expressions of your thinking (wants, ideas, vision)
- No waffling or qualifying
- Requests made as wants, not needs



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