



The Look & Sound of Leadership™

Executive Coaching Tips

SINCE 1990

HOW TEAMS FIGHT

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Conflict is good – except when it’s not

Sirhan was giving me an update about his team. I had coached Sirhan almost two years earlier and we’d stayed in touch.

One major change he’d implemented as a result of our work was a [makeover of his team’s meetings](#). This new way of meeting had generated many effective behaviors. But one area had been bumpy: how team members fought with each other. He was telling me about that now.

“You remember Kelly and Jared?” he asked, naming two of his direct reports.

“Sure.”

“Well, for a while they became open enemies. Their anger infected us all, me maybe most of all. I was very irritated every day. And I don’t want to feel that way at work. So I asked myself what was irritating me. I decided it was the conflict that was happening in the team. I remembered you had said conflict was a good thing. You remember saying that, right?”

“Absolutely. I still believe it – if it’s *healthy* conflict.”

“Exactly! This did not feel healthy to me.”

“Because?” I asked.

“Because people were attacking each other’s worth. It felt very personal.”



That was a powerful descriptor of unhealthy conflict. I asked, “So what did you do?”

“I tried two things. One went well. The other, not so much.”

“I’m all ears,” I said.

Unhealthy personal attacks

“The one that worked was an idea of Kelly’s, actually. It might not have mattered if the team hadn’t started making decisions together. But they had. That was part of the new meeting structure, remember?”

“Of course,” I said.

“Well, the fighting was starting to get personal. Usually Kelly was asking for more information and Jared was saying her demands were crushing the business.”

“That doesn’t sound so personal. Those sound like legitimate stances.”

“Maybe, except she was saying things like, ‘Jared, do you think I’d walk off a cliff just because you asked me to?’ And he was no better. One day he told her she wouldn’t be able to get ten people on a twenty-person bus unless she had a slide deck and a spread sheet.”

“Yikes! OK, that sounds pretty personal. So what did you do?”

“I supported a suggestion of Kelly’s.”

“Which was...?”

He smiled at his memory, then said, “She actually made a very strong stand. We were considering a project of Jared’s and she said, ‘If I vote to support your project, I’ll commit to doing whatever I can to ensure it has a successful outcome. I expect the same from all of you if you vote for one of my projects. But I’m sorry, Jared, there’s not enough information here to make a good decision. There’s just not. You have to bring us more data.’”



“Wow. Strong stand indeed!” I said.

“Wasn’t it? Well, I decided she had a point. The group didn’t have enough information to make a good decision because he’d only prepared what he’d normally bring to me.”

“How do you mean?”

Healthy examination of facts

“Jared and I have worked together a long time. I trust him. When he’d come to me for approval, I never needed much information before saying yes to him. But when Kelly said, ‘Hey, hold on! I need to understand this more,’ I saw her point.”

“And this somehow stopped the fighting? I’d think Jared would’ve hit the roof.”

Sirhan laughed. “Oh, he did! But he came back with more data and proved his point to the team. And it was good for him. For everyone! Before long, the team was looking at everyone’s work and saying, ‘Convince us.’ It’s made all of us better.”

I was trying to connect the dots. Finally, I asked, “If your boss asked you why the team is better now – why the fighting has become more productive – what would you tell her?”

He thought a minute, then said, “The team used to fight turf battles. They’d try to poke holes in each other’s work. But now they are fighting about what’s best for the business.”

“Isn’t what’s best for the business completely subjective?” I asked.

“Indeed it is! So what we really end up fighting about is why something is or isn’t good for the business. Those are good fights.”

I nodded, impressed.

Changing his tone, he said, “So let me tell you about the one that didn’t work so well.”



Toxic non-verbal behavior

He continued. “Before Kelly took her stand that day, her frustration had been building. I could see it. She was doing a lot of eye rolling and sighing and shaking her head. It was especially blatant when Jared would talk. I didn’t like it.”

“It’s interesting that you put that sort of behavior in the category of how the team fights,” I commented.

“To me, it felt like fighting. I’d see her give those little huffs and, to me, it was like a bomb going off.”

“No, no, I agree with you. I think it *is* a form of fighting, but most people don’t think of non-verbal behaviors that way. But I’m with you!”

“Is that what you call those behaviors? Non-verbals?”

“Yep.”

“That’s perfect,” he said. “And Kelly had a lot of them.”

“So what did you try?”

“Well, I called her into my office and said I didn’t like it, that it felt disrespectful. And I wanted it to stop.”

“Good for you, Sirhan. How’d that go?”

He smiled. “Well, at first she pretended she didn’t know what I was talking about. But then she owned up to it and said she’d stop. But it felt pretty grudging. All in all, I’d give myself maybe a C+. I felt pretty ineffective.”

“Did she stop?”

“Not really. Her behaviors got smaller but they were still there. It almost made it feel worse.”

“Because?”

“Because it felt so personal. It was like she was saying, non-verbally, ‘That idea is so stupid and so are you!’ It was dripping with contempt. Clearly a little talking to in my office wasn’t very effective.”



We sat in silence for a minute with him looking right at me. Then he cocked his head and asked, “So?”

I laughed. “Are you expecting some answer from me?”

“That was my hope!”

“Oh! OK. What was the question?”

Address non-verbals in the moment

“So there I am. I’m sitting in the meeting. These are all my direct reports, and Kelly gives this little huff and an eye roll. It’s not a big thing. But it’s a thing. What do I do? Do I call her out on it?”

“What would that sound like?”

“That’s what I’m asking you!” he laughed.

“You first. What do you want to say to her?”

He gave a long, “Uh...,” then said, “‘Kelly, don’t. We agreed you were going to stop.’ Oh, no, I don’t like that. It sounds like a scolding parent. Your turn. What would you say?”

“I’d say something like, ‘Kelly, it looked like you had something to say.’”

“That’s all?”

“Yes. Just invite her to speak,” I said.

“And if she says no?”

“What if she does?”

“Well, she clearly *does* have something to say. So if she says, ‘No, no, nothing. I’m fine,’ how do I reply?”

“Sirhan, whether she speaks or not has nothing to do with you. Your job is just to notice that she had a reaction and invite her to express it. If she chooses not to, move on.”



He gave a thoughtful nod and a quiet, “Oh.” Then he brightened, “If I do that and she doesn’t speak up, then she can’t come complaining to me later!”

“Says who?”

“Well, she had her chance and didn’t take it.”

I laughed. “That doesn’t mean she can’t complain to you later!”

“I suppose so,” he said, laughing, too. Then more seriously, “Isn’t this going to embarrass her?”

“Why would it embarrass her?”

“It’s as if I’m saying, ‘I saw that and I’m not going to let you get away with it.’ Back to the scolding parent.”

“That’s not the intent, Sirhan. If you say it with a disapproving attitude, it might sound that way. But if you’re willing to be just curious and interested, it’s just an invitation.” I said it again in a friendly, inviting tone. “Kelly, it looked like you had something you wanted to say.”

“It’s like some martial art move. Embrace your opponent before you throw her to the mat.”

“Does this feel like some sort competition to you?”

A team-wide tactic

“It feels a bit like a power move on my part, yes.”

“I see it a little differently. Observing someone’s behavior out loud doesn’t raise anyone above anyone else. Someday, if the team gets really high functioning, someone’ll do it to you!”

“I’d welcome that. I probably have some non-verbals I should be aware of. They really are insidious, aren’t they?”

“Some therapists use them as predictors of whether a couple will stay together.”



“You mean, if they’re rolling their eyes, they won’t stay together?”

“Right, because the non-verbal behavior indicates issues that are not getting talked about.”

“And if you can’t talk about the tough stuff, the relationship isn’t strong.”

“Exactly,” I said. “I’ve seen high-performing teams where they do it to each other with a lot of humor and kindness. If the team is really committed to being sure people get heard, they recognize each other’s signals. And they invite each other to speak all the time.”

“They must be awfully good at being uncritical.”

“They are. They’re just curious. ‘Hey, what were you thinking?’ Instead of fighting, there’s a lot of talking and listening.”

He gave a grunt. “Ugh! Listening! There’s a never-ending journey!” Then, “But then, I suppose, so is dealing with conflict.”

Sirhan left our lunch reassured about his first tactic regarding the team’s fights: continue to have them wrestle with the question ‘what’s best for the business’. He was also determined to address negative non-verbals the instant he saw them by inviting the person to speak. And he wanted his team to learn to do it, too – even to him! Those two tactics would help the team’s conflict remain healthy and thus project *The Look & Sound of Leadership*.™

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