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DON'T TAKE ANYTHING PERSONALLY

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DECEMBER 2019

This month's coaching conversation wrestles with the eternal struggle to depersonalize the events in our lives that feel so personal. Is it even possible to actualize the adage, "Don't take it personally?"

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Money and trust

Karin used to run an entire department for a state university. She managed hundreds of people and a six-figure budget. Then she transitioned into a senior role in the investment banking world. She found herself working for a boss who wouldn't let her authorize any expenditure over $100.

Karin understood, at first. But by the time our coaching began, she'd been in her position three years and her boss still held her to a $100 limit.

"Wouldn't you think I'd have earned his trust by now?" she said, steamed at the insult. "I've given him every reason to trust me. But he obviously doesn't or he'd let me manage my own budget."

"Oh!" I said in surprise. "Do think this is about you?"

"You bet your ass," she said. "If he thought I was trustworthy he'd let me out of this choke collar." She pulled at an imaginary restraint.

"Do you imagine if someone else were in your position, he'd give that person a different authority over expenditures?"

"Maybe. I don't know. But after three years, wouldn't you think I'd've earned his trust?"

"I think you *have* earned his trust, Karin," I replied. "I think this is how he manages. My guess is he does this to everyone."

"It sure *feels* like it's about me," she said. And we began to discuss what it means to take things personally.

Harshly accused

Stefan, the manager of a small group, was struggling with a very different situation that also felt deeply personal.

Stefan managed enormous amounts of data by walking around and talking to people about their work. A good listener, most people liked talking with Stefan.

One day, at the desk of a guy named Robert, Stefan was asking lots of questions as normal. Suddenly, Robert began to raise his voice, accusing Stefan of being a micro manager and a bottleneck and worse.

Much to his regret, Stefan raised his voice, too. It was not pretty.

Nine months later, when our coaching began, Stefan still felt shame about the whole incident. Plus, he'd begun to doubt his own methods and intentions.

During one of our first coaching conversations, I asked if I could show him something on his computer. He said sure and logged me in.

I pulled up a review from the *Los Angeles Times* of a little movie called, *"She's Out of My League."*

I read to him from the screen. "'Much of the film's good humor comes courtesy of lead actor Jay Baruchel.

Nothing would work without the appealing Baruchel.'" I looked at Stefan and smiled. "How'd you like to wake up and read *that* about yourself in the newspaper one morning? That'd be fun, wouldn't it?"

He gave a smile, "I guess, yeah."

"Well, I sure think so. Anyway, now look at this."

I pulled up a review of the same movie from the *New York Times*. Together we read the critic's declaration that the movie was a dud, and the major reason it was a dud was because of the very same Jay Baruchel.

I turned to Stefan. "Imagine poor Jay Baruchel facing that contradiction over his morning cereal."

The critics speak

"That'd be totally crazy making!" he said.

"Because it feels really personal, right?" I said.

"Yeah! Like it's about your essence."

"Or your talent. Or whatever. But here's the reason I pulled up those reviews. Contradictions like this happen all the time in criticism. Whenever they happen, I think about the actual events. What really happened? Two critics went to see a movie, right? They probably sat next to each at the same screening. One hated the lead actor. One loved the lead actor.

"But they both saw the same movie! At the same time!" I asked, "How do you make sense of that?"

"They're different people. They have different tastes. Or different backgrounds or education. Or gender. Or generations. I don't know."

"I agree! Their opinions about poor old Jay Baruchel are actually about each of them, not about Baruchel at all. He's just the object they're projecting on. So I think good old Jay shouldn't take either of those reviews personally."

"I wonder if he does," Stefan laughed.

"Well, what about you, Stefan?"

"What about me what?" he asked.

"What about you and Robert?"

He puzzled for a minute, then, gesturing at the computer, said, "I'm not sure I'm getting the connection."

I said, "I call this *Acting on the Corporate Stage*. Every day, you come to the office and you project out this thing called Stefan. It shoots out of you like a movie. You are the actor on the corporate stage. And everyone around you is a reviewer.

"Robert is just another reviewer. There he is, watching *Stefan, The Movie*, and, for whatever reason, it upsets him. He writes a bad review. Does that mean you have re-cut the movie? Or burn all the copies?"

"I suppose not," he said. "But I don't like that I lost my temper."

One of *The Four Agreements*

"Understood. Here's the thing. I don't think you would have lost your temper if you hadn't taken his attack personally."

"But it *was* personal. He was really attacking me!"

Nodding, in a tone of agreement, I said, "Like the *New York Times* attacked Jay Baruchel."

He took in a breath to disagree, then caught himself. I saw his shoulders drop. He shook his head and said, "It sure feels personal."

The energy seemed to go out of him.

I said, "Can I show you one last thing?"

"Okay," he said.

I indicated I wanted the keyboard. As I pulled it over, I asked, "Do you know *The Four Agreements?*"

"It's a book, right?" he said.

"Right. The author is Don Miguel Ruiz. It's a best seller year after year. Okay! This is what I was looking for.

"The second agreement is 'Don't Take Anything Personally.' Here's something he says about that. 'Whatever people do, feel, think, or say, *don't take it personally*. If they tell you how wonderful you are, they are not saying that because of you. You know you are wonderful. It is not necessary to believe other people who tell you that you are wonderful.'"

He laughed, saying, "Like the *LA Times* about that actor!"

I laughed, too. "Right! But he goes on. He says, 'Don't take *anything* personally. Even if someone got a gun and shot you in the head, it was nothing personal. Even at that extreme.'" I looked at him and said, "Even if someone shoots you in the head. Nothing personal. And he means it."

He said quietly, "Like Robert yelling at me."

Over time, Stefan explored *Acting on the Corporate Stage*. Thinking of himself as a movie he could write and direct helped him make better choices. Imagining feedback as movie reviews helped give him distance. Things began to feel less personal.

Karin came to see her boss's tight grip on her was more about his conservative nature than about her competence. The situation began to feel less personal.

When Karin and Stefan took things less personally, they both felt healthier. And happier. Not surprisingly, they also found themselves closer to *The Look & Sound of Leadership*.

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Core Concepts:

- People treat you according to their own rules. Their choices are not about you.
- When you're angry or upset about an incident, you're taking it personally.
- Not everyone will like you or your work or your results. That's not personal. That's life.
- You are the director of the movie called "You." What do you want to project onto the screen?

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