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PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

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This month's coaching conversation follows a leader who worries that he's not very adept when it comes to creating personal connections. He and Tom explore two skills and one mindset that will help ease his way.

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Danger in connections

Amit was uneasy.

He had read article after article saying that, during the pandemic, managers need to connect with their people now more than ever. The articles were urging managers to ask about people's lives, show interest in them, not just as workers, but as people, to create personal connections.

Amit told me, "For years, I was told *not* to have personal conversations with my direct reports. And I didn't. Now, suddenly, I'm supposed to just flip and talk personally?"

"What's your concern?" I asked.

"Well, I just don't think I'm very good at those sorts of personal conversations. Is that something we could talk about in the coaching?"

"Sure." I asked him, "Am I right, you have two different concerns? One concern is about crossing a line. The other is whether your skills will help you make connections. Did I get it right?"

“Yeah,” he said, liking that synopsis.

I asked, “Do you have other concerns?”

He considered, then slowly said, “Not yet.”

“So let’s start with crossing a line. What line are you worried about crossing?” I asked.

“It’s funny. I don’t know exactly. It’s not like I read something specific somewhere, or attended a training about it. It’s just this sense of danger, like there’s a lawsuit lurking out there if I start talking to my people about their personal lives.”

I asked, “What do you do with your people now? Do you know who’s married? Who has kids? People’s hobbies? Do you know anything?”

“Some,” he said. “You know, people would chat while they’re setting up for meetings or in the kitchen. That’s where I hear things.”

“And you don’t inquire directly because you’re the boss and if you cross a line, you might get sued. Am I close?”

“I think that’s right.”

“I’d like to change your thinking, Amit. But before I start, I have to recognize that every workplace is different. I don’t know yours very well. You have to be savvy to suit your situation. But just in terms of understanding the rules of the game, here’s what might put you in jeopardy. Managers put themselves in jeopardy when they treat one person – or one group – differently from how they treat everyone else. So let’s say there’s one Asian American woman on your team. If you ask her about her life outside work, but you don’t ask anyone else, that can be seen as discriminatory. She’s being treated differently.”

“Even if I’m genuinely interested?” he asked.

“Intention doesn’t get you off the hook. What puts you in jeopardy is a pattern of behavior that treats one person,

or one class of people, differently from everyone else. But if you ask *everyone* about their life outside work, it's fine. When you spread your behavior far and wide, there's no jeopardy."

"Nice to know. I'm okay as long as I'm equally inept with everyone!" Then he asked, "So how do I get better at this? What do I need to do?"

> "Intention doesn't get you off the hook

Curiosity and Questions

"Okay," I said, "so we're at the skills part. I'm going to start by talking about just two things. Both help you make connections with people. And you can use them whether you're in person or on video." His whole team was now remote. As were he and I.

"And the two things are…?"

"Curiosity and questions."

"Aren't those the same things?" he asked. "If you ask a question you have to be curious, right?"

"Oh, I don't think so!" I said. "I see people all the time ask questions they already know the answer to. They are the opposite of curious."

He laughed, "You're right! I know people like that, too."

"I think we're all that way sometimes. But when you're trying to connect with other people, curiosity is an incredible lubricant. But being genuinely curious is hard. And hard to sustain. But it creates connection, if you can do it."

"Is curiosity something I can learn?" he asked.

"It takes practice, like anything," I said, "but, yes, I think you can learn curiosity."

"How do you teach anyone to be curious?" he asked, intrigued.

"I have a three-part model for listening, and one part is particularly great to help people be curious."

“Really?” he asked.

“Well, you tell me. Before I start, I want to preface this by saying that this model imagines that we cycle through these three ways of listening all the time. Each one has its own time and purpose. But only one of them helps you be curious, which helps you create connections.”

I could see he was with me. I went on.

Three ways to listen

“Here are the three ways we listen to each other. First, listen to win. You listen to win when you’re trying to score points, when you want your idea to prevail.”

Amit smiled, “Oh, I think that’s me a lot of the time.”

“Is it?” I asked.

“Yeah. A competition of ideas completely engages me. I love debates. And I like having the best idea! So, yeah, I listen to win all the time.”

I nodded and said, “Great. See what you think of number two. Listen to fix.”

He laughed. “Did my wife put you up to this? I fall into listening to fix all the time. It annoys her no end. And I understand why. It’s man-splaining. I don’t like ‘listen to fix.’”

“Would it be okay if it were intentional? If someone came to you and asked for your help, wouldn’t you listen to fix? And be good at it, I bet.”

“That’s true. You’re right.” Then, “So is that the one that has curiosity in it? Because if I’m going to listen to fix, I have to be curious about whatever you’re telling me.”

“I know what you mean, but I don’t think so. Listening to fix is listening with a purpose. That’s not curiosity. That’s a fix-it mentality.”

“Yes, I can see that,” he said. “So what’s number three?”

“Listen to learn,” I said, then stopped as he looked away from the screen, thinking.

> Listen to win, fix or learn

When he looked back, he said, “I don’t think I do that very much any more. I think I did when I was a student. I was interested in lots of different things. I was curious a lot of the time. When I wasn’t being a know-it-all! It was fun, like being in a playground of ideas. Anything could happen. These days, not so much.”

“I’ll be honest, Amit. I think this muscle is under-developed in most people. It’s hard to stay curious without getting distracted by your own thoughts.”

He laughed, “I’m not even sure I know what that would be like!”

I laughed, too.

He said, “Is this where questions come in?”

Questions

“What a good question!” I said, aiming my finger at him. “Okay. Questions. Can I give you my mini-rant about questions? Ready?”

Grinning, he shrunk back and said, “I don’t know!”

“Here’s my thing. Ask ‘How’ questions. ‘How are your kids?’ ‘How did that turn out?’ ‘How are you doing?’ ‘How was the meeting?’”

“Open-ended questions, right?” he asked.

> Our brains want to ask ‘yes/no’

“Exactly. Sounds easy, right? But watch yourself and see. I think our brains are wired to ask each other yes/no questions. ‘Are your kids okay?’ ‘Did you like it?’ ‘Are you okay?’ ‘How’d the meeting go?’ I think it’s hard to ask ‘how’ questions.”

“’Why’ questions are open-ended, too, right?” he asked.

“They are, but I shy away from them. They can sound like a challenge sometimes. ‘Why did you do that?’ ‘Why did you choose that?’ ‘Why would that happen?’ ‘Why’ questions can put people on the defensive, unintentionally.”

“I can hear that,” he said. Mostly to himself, he said, “I don’t know if I ask ‘how’ questions. I’ll have to see.”

Express interest

I said, “Here’s something else I do when I’m listening to learn. They’re not questions exactly. I call them ‘expressions of interest.’ They’re statements, like, ‘That’s interesting.’ Or ‘Tell me about that.’ Or ‘No kidding!’ Or just, ‘Huh!’”

“My brother-in-law does that.”

“Really? And what happens?” I said.

“The ball keeps rolling. He throws in one of those and the other person just keeps talking.”

> “Use video to create connections

“Which is a great way to create personal connections, right? Keep the other person talking. You know something else that keeps people talking these days? Video!”

“Really? How so?”

“Think about the two of us here, one-on-one on video. My face is way closer to you than it ever would be in a meeting room. Or even across a desk. You can see if I’m distracted. You can see my feelings when I have them. That means I can use non-verbals to keep you talking.”

“What’s an example?” he asked.

I smiled and said, “Here’s one I think I’ve done with you. Nodding in slow motion. While you talk, I nod my head slowly up and down. My non-verbal behavior says, ‘I’m listening.’ Then, when you get to the end of your thought and stop speaking, I keep nodding. I do not speak. The non-verbal message is ‘Keep talking.’ And most people do.”

He gave his head a regretful shake. “You have to be pretty comfortable with silence to do that. Silence is tough for me.”

“Just one more thing to work on,” I said with a shrug and a smile.

“Along with curiosity.” Then he asked, “Do you know the Dorothy Parker epigram about curiosity? ‘The cure for boredom is curiosity. There is no cure for curiosity.’”

“I love that!” I said, seeing curiosity as a less traveled path leading to *The Look & Sound of Leadership.*

Core Concepts:

- Personal connections with your direct reports is more important than ever.
- Create connections by displaying curiosity. Listen to learn.
- Resist ‘yes/no’ questions. Ask ‘how’ questions.
- Your thoughts will try to distract you. Keep listening to learn.
- Express interest and keep the other person talking.

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