



Hosted by Tom Henschel

## Staying Afloat in a Shitstorm

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A highly effective leader finds herself in the middle of a terrible mess, not of her own making. When her coach marvels at her ability to stay calm amidst the chaos, she shares a lesson she learned from her dad.

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### Calm in the Storm

Rana had reason to be upset.

Her reputation for making large-scale sales was well-known. She'd been hired by a company and placed on a division leadership team that had been together for years – in some cases, decades. That leadership team, which included women, had no interest in welcoming this outsider who was supposed to boost their performance. Any success she generated, they figured, could only reflect badly on them.

During our coaching sessions, Rana told me she found the team's blatant displays of disrespect appalling. Over and over, they would tell her flat out that her ideas were bad and wrong, although they knew she'd used them elsewhere with success – which was why the company had hired her! When one idea of hers actually got approved, the team simply ignored it and continued doing what they'd always done.

At one session, while she was telling me about yet another galling incident, she sighed and said, "Every conversation with every one of them feels like a battle. I'm tired."

She spoke those powerful feelings quite neutrally.

She went on, saying, "You know, some days, I just stop working. I have to. I close up my computer and go for a walk. Better I do that than send off a flaming email – which is what I want to do a lot of the time."

"But you don't," I said.

"Wouldn't get me anywhere," she said, shaking her head.

Neither of us spoke. Then I said, "Rana, may I give you some feedback?"

She raised her eyebrows, a little surprised. "Sure," she said.

**"These stories haven't changed much. If anything, they've escalated."**

"Thanks," I said. "You and I have been talking for months. These stories haven't changed much. If anything, they've escalated. But you haven't. This situation really sucks. You didn't create it and you don't deserve it, but you're in it. I think most people in your situation would be upset. That would not surprise me. But you seem very cool about this. Which *does* surprise me. I applaud you, Rana. Actually, I'd like to know your secret."

Dismissively, she shrugged and repeated herself, "Closing the computer and walking away."

I nodded. "Okay. That's great. Take a time out. But I'm guessing there's more."

She looked at me, then smiled. "Oh, yes, there is more," she said.

### **"They're Doing Their Best"**

She settled in and took a breath. She said, "My dad was what they used to call 'a titan of industry.' He used to say his work was like playing chess where the pieces are the size of cities. My dad played at a pretty high level.

"When I was eleven or so, he started telling me stories about his work. Maybe he'd always told them to me, but that was when I started being really fascinated. He would explain that there was a decision to be made. And he would explain the stakes. The decision might be about millions of dollars, or thousands of people. I remember once the future of an entire town was hanging in the balance.

"He would tell me about the different people on the different sides of the decision. He'd tell me what they'd said and what they'd done. And, let me tell you, my dad was a good storyteller. He could paint a nasty villain. And I was all in. I would hear about these people, I would get so mad.

"He would always tell me the same thing. He'd say, 'Rana, they're doing their best.' And that would outrage me even more, because to me, that was like an excuse. I wanted those people to be accountable for what they'd done. I wanted people punished!

"And he'd say, 'They might be held accountable someday, but don't forget the game you're playing. You see, now I know something that helps me play the game. Now that I know what their best looks like, I know how much I can count on them, or not count on them. My game just got a whole lot better because I know what their best is.'"

Rana nodded and smiled, thinking about her dad. Then, still nodding, she said, "It took me a long time to really believe in the idea of 'they're doing their best'. At first I thought it made me superior, like I was looking down on them. But the core concept is really about acceptance. You have to accept that some people do things like that. They do. Some people do things that are jaw dropping. It can be hard to accept."

I made a sound of agreement.

She said, "So here I am. I'm in a shitstorm. No doubt about it. But these guys, they're doing their best. If I can accept that and keep my eyes on the bigger prize, then it's my move on the chess board. I can do whatever I want. The power's with me."

I said, "What a gift, Rana. Thanks for sharing all that. Can I ask a question?"

"Sure," she said.

"How did you get there?" I asked. "How did you get to acceptance?"

**Acceptance  
always makes  
a better  
outcome.**

She thought, then said, "Partly being a mom, I think. To me, being a good mom is all about acceptance. Unconditional positive regard. 'These kids are truly doing their best.' I try to live that every day. And, let me tell you, it's a challenge! But I've learned a lot about acceptance. So these days I can get to acceptance a lot faster than I used to. And acceptance always makes a better outcome – especially in a hot mess like this!"

"Acceptance creates better outcomes," I echoed. "I love that connection."

"It's true for me," she said. "Look, I don't know what's going to happen here. I won't be surprised if I end up leaving, but while I'm here, I'm going to do my best, and I'm going to be my best. To do that, I have to believe these guys are doing *their* best."

I said, "I hear how helpful it is to you, Rana. I'm so glad you have that story in you."

"There's a downside to it, of course," she said.

"There is? What's that?" I asked.

"Doubt." As if scolding herself, she said, "I mean, come on! Do you mean to tell me that their 'best' wouldn't have been better if you weren't there? You must've done something to make this shitshow happen.' That's the flipside. If this is their best and this is where it got us, I must've had something to do with it."

I said, "You and I have talked about your doubts. Do you feel you're stuck in doubt?"

"No," she answered. "No worse than normal. But I do wonder why I do it at all."

"Do what?"

"Turn on the self-doubt. Wonder if I'm the problem. I don't know why I do that."

### Addressing the 'Why' Question

I nodded. "It's a reasonable question. You've noticed a pattern and you want to understand it better. Great. I just feel I have to point out that, you and I, in our coaching, are not going to answer that question."

"We aren't?"

**"The answers to 'why' questions are somewhere inside your thoughts and feelings."**

"No," I said. "'Why' questions are psychological questions. 'Why do I find myself in this situation, over and over?' 'Why do I say the things I say?' Why, why why? The answers to 'why' questions are somewhere inside your thoughts and feelings. A good therapist will guide you through the forest and help you find your answers. But I'm not a therapist, I'm a coach. I can't guide you to 'why' answers, but I can give you a good work-around for the situation."

"But I could do both?" she said.

"Oh, heavens, yes. I'm a big proponent of good therapy. It's a good complement to coaching."

She nodded. "So let's suppose I was beating myself up about something. Do you have a work-around for stopping the cycle?"

"I do," I said. "It has three parts. Want to hear them?"

"Go ahead," she said.

“Okay. First, let’s consider what we’re trying to do. We’re trying to stop the hamster wheel of doubt. We want to quiet the constant ‘why’ questions. That’s when these three steps come in handy.

“The first step is to clarify the issue in your own head. ‘What is the issue, really?’ ‘What am I upset about, really?’ ‘What do I wish were different, exactly?’ You will not ask yourself *why* you want that thing. You will ask yourself, ‘What is it that I want, exactly?’ That’s part one.

“Part two, you ask yourself, ‘If that is what I want, if that’s where I am, how do I feel about that? How am I?’”

She said, “When I’m stuck in doubt, that’s the only feeling I have. Doubt! Interesting to think there might be other feelings. Huh. Okay. What’s step three?”

“You ask yourself, ‘What do I want to *do*? Now that I know my situation, and I know how I feel, what action do I want to take?’ As you would say, ‘It’s your move on the chess board.’” I looked and said, “Those three steps can help break a cycle of doubt.”

**“When you’re  
in a world  
of trouble,  
acceptance  
helps.”**

She nodded. “That little workaround has a lot of acceptance in it. If you want to move to action, accept what’s going on. Maybe that’s the lesson of the day: when you’re in a world of trouble, acceptance helps.”

I echoed her earlier statement, “Acceptance creates better outcomes.”

We were both quiet.

Then I said, “I learned a saying from my dad that has a lot of acceptance built into it, too.”

“What was it?” she asked.

“My dad was a junior officer in the navy during World War II. The one saying he brought home that I heard over and over was, ‘There’s always some poor bastard who doesn’t get the word.’ When things would go wrong, he’d say that. Some poor bastard didn’t get the word. And he’d say it with real kindness. Y’know, things go wrong. Things break. People get hurt. Sometimes people die ... because some poor bastard didn’t get the word.”

“That’s terrible,” she said.

I said, "I never took it that way. I always took it to mean that, when something bad happens, yes, most likely you can find the person who screwed up. But then, what if, instead of blaming them, you think, it's not really their fault, they just didn't get the word? For me, it's created compassion, like for you it created acceptance."

She shook her head. "But my situation isn't about them not getting the word. These guys know exactly what they're doing."

"Right," I agreed. "But what if the word they didn't get was about how to play nicely in the sandbox with others? How to embrace change? How to live in abundance? What if they just didn't get the word?"

"Whoa," she said, and exploded finger bombs at her temples. "That is acceptance on a grand scale."

Rana ended up transferring to another division. Throughout all the chaos and frustration, her ability to accept the situation, and her commitment to show up as her best self, was a masterful display of [The Look & Sound of Leadership](#).



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## Core Concepts

- In bad situations, it's natural to create heroes and villains.
- In bad situations, it's normal to have big emotions.
- People do their best: don't assign negative intent.
- Bad situations get better if you can find compassion.
- Focus on action, not on 'why'.

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