



Hosted by Tom Henschel

Finding Management Courage

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A vice president, struggling to control his team of artists, learns a technique from his coach for managing bad behavior. He likes it so much, he uses it with his high performers, too.

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Team out of control

Bryan had been a vice president of consumer product graphics for six years. A gifted artist himself, he led a team of other gifted artists who supplied images that would adorn millions of products around the globe.

He and I had worked together when he'd first moved into the position. Back then, we'd focused on finding his voice as a leader. We had laughed a lot. I'm glad to say the coaching had been not only enjoyable, but successful. Plus his office was a delight to the eye – art of all kinds filled the space, in every size and style, from little erasers to giant figures. I had always looked forward to being with Bryan.

Currently, Bryan appeared unable to control his team. Their deadlines were often dramatic affairs and bad behavior seemed rampant, all of which reflected badly on Bryan. His boss, Iris, whom I'd met during his initial coaching six years earlier, had told Bryan he needed to manage his group's bad behavior or move to another role. He'd asked if he could work with me again and she happily said yes. So he and I were together laughing once more.

Months into our coaching, an incident flared up.

Todd, one of Bryan's direct reports and the loosest of loose cannons, had shown up at a client meeting completely inappropriate in his dress and behavior. Once again, Bryan's ability to manage his team's bad behavior was under scrutiny.

He and I discussed the crisis management aspects of the situation for some time. Then I asked Bryan what his long-range strategy was. He asked me to clarify.

I began, "Once everything settles down..."

"Assuming no heads roll," he threw in.

Managing bad behavior

"...you still have to manage the team. That's Iris's goal for you. How are you going to manage the team's bad behavior?"

"With someone like Todd? Are you serious? What is there to do other than tie him down? Or lock him out!"

"Come on, Bryan, he's not crazy. This is just bad behavior. He's throwing tantrums. You have to step in. What are you going to do?"

"What *can* I do? He just doesn't care anymore."

"Do you think he wants to get fired?"

"Maybe," he said.

I considered, then asked, "What if you start managing Todd's bad behavior as if it's just that? Behavior. Make your feedback behavioral. Don't get angry at him. Don't make it about his character or whether he cares about the company. Don't even name it bad. Just behavior."

He gave a weary sigh. "I don't want to start nitpicking everything he does. It'll never end."

Sort and share

"It's not about being a nitpick." I said, "If you're behavioral, you only have two things to do. Sort and share."

"Sounds like pre-school," he laughed.

"It does, doesn't it?" I laughed, too, never having thought of that.

**"Make your
feedback
behavioral.
Don't get angry
at him."**

"This is something you can teach me?" he asked.

"Let's just do it, for real," I suggested. "Start with what are we talking about."

"Managing Todd's bad behavior," he said.

"Right," I agreed. "And even more, the whole team's behavior. Don't forget, Iris has her eye on the whole team."

"Ugh! Which is going include Audrey at some point, but let's not go there yet!" he said in dread of another difficult direct report.

"So when you want to manage bad behavior," I went on, "here's where to begin. Stop reacting and take a look at it. Just look at it. Put it way out in a field somewhere then look at it from an airliner. Get some distance."

I stopped talking and watched. He was open to my suggestion and was actually picturing Todd's behavior from afar.

After a moment, quietly, I said, "If you had to put a label on all that, what would you call it?"

After a second, with some heat, he said, "Unprofessional behavior."

"So you know what you just did? You sorted."

"OK. So you know what you just did? You sorted. That's where managing bad behavior starts. You get some distance from the bad behavior and put a label on it. Oh, and by the way, your label, 'unprofessional behavior,' is okay, but it's negative. I stay away from negative labels, even if they're accurate. Positive labels you can make aspirational. Negative ones sound like something's broken. 'Unprofessional.' I think I'd be defensive if someone put a label like that on me."

The label conversation

"Oh, that's a good distinction," he said. "I definitely want a positive label! So what would that be? I guess if it can't be 'unprofessional behavior,' then it'll be 'professional behavior.' I see how that's better to talk with him about. OK. So is that sorting? Are we on to sharing?"

"Uh, not quite. So yes, you've done some sorting. You sorted everything in the past. Now you start sorting from this minute forward. Every time Todd does something, think of the label. And you sort what he does according to the label. Is it professional or not? Those are the only two choices."

He was picturing something and nodded. "Yes, I can imagine that." He shifted his gaze to look

at me. "And then what?"

"And then you get to tell Todd about the label."

"Ah!" He gave a little scream as if the pen on his desk had come to life. Then we both laughed at his scream. "I wasn't expecting that!"

"Does it sound scary?" I asked.

He considered. "No, actually, it sounds perfect. I just hadn't pictured it. But you'd have to talk with him about the label. Or there's no point to the sorting."

"So what do you imagine you'd tell him?" I asked.

He thought for a second, then focused on me, as if I was Todd. "Todd, I'd like to start a new chapter with you. From now on I'm only going to talk with you about one thing: professional behavior. So when we have a civil conversation, like this one has been so far, I will tell you, 'Todd, that was professional behavior! Good job!' But when something like that conversation we had last week happens, where you were yelling and cursing at me, that will not be professional behavior. And I will tell you that."

I loved being with Bryan.

I said, "Fantastic, Bryan. Could you actually say all that to him?"

He laughed. "We'll see! Sometimes I get scared of him."

"Which works in his favor, doesn't it? Using his bad behavior like a threat puts a muzzle on you."

Share what you sorted

"But not now that he and I are going to have a label conversation," he said. "So now what? I just start sharing, right?"

**"...first you
sort the
behavior..."**

"Right. You share whatever you sorted. So something happens like at that client meeting, first you sort the behavior..."

"Unprofessional! No brainer!" he tossed out.

"...then you share your thoughts about it with him."

"Okay, okay, okay. Let me give it a shot!" He closed his eyes. After a minute, he opened his

eyes, looked at me, and said, "Todd, your language at that client meeting was completely inappropriate. We've all been attending those meetings together a long time. We all know the rules. Can you understand why people are upset?"

As Todd, I sneered, "So is this crap factory going to dictate everything I do? It's not enough they tell me what to draw, now they're going to tell me what I can and can't say? I don't even have first amendment rights anymore?"

**"Well! Didn't
take long for me
to crumble, did
it?"**

Bryan's mouth opened but nothing came out. He froze. Finally he burst out laughing.

"Well! Didn't take long for me to crumble, did it? But it was a strong start!"

"Very strong! Amazing, actually!"

"Really?" he asked, curious, not playing.

"Yes, Bryan. That was great. You described what happened. Could you do it again?"

Always willing, he said, "Sure! Why?"

"Well, our friend Todd really stuck it to you, didn't he?"

"That's what he does!"

"I know! Bad behavior!" I agreed. "And, in addition, I think you invited it."

"Katy, bar the door!"

"Me? Why? What did I do?"

"You asked him an open-ended question. 'Can you understand why people are upset?' I'm glad you care, but pardon me, this is not time for him to share. That train has left the station. It's only time for you to share. You are going to report what you sorted. Period."

"Okay, okay, okay, let me try it." He took a breath and said, "Todd your language at that client meeting was not professional behavior." He took a breath as if he had more to say. Then he thought. Then he stopped and broke into a smile. "I don't have to say anything other than that, do I?"

"No, you don't have to!"

"When you said 'share,' I pictured something a whole lot longer than one sentence!"

I shrugged. "Just share what you sorted."

"That's managing bad behavior? 'What you did was not professional.' That's it?"

"Yes, after you find the label and tell him about it."

"And if he wants to debate it?"

"Want to try?" I asked.

"Sure!"

"So you tell me that wasn't professional behavior, and I say, 'Oooh, not professional. Are you threatening me? Are we going to have a big union thing again?'"

He looked stunned. He was scanning his thoughts and coming up blank.

I whispered to him, "Just stick with the label. Over and over."

He looked delighted. Speaking to me as if I was Todd, he said, "Todd? That, that you did just now? That's not professional behavior either. I'm just telling you how I'm sorting your behavior. I told you I would and I am. There is no threat."

"Yes!" I hissed and gave a pump.

He was excited. "I could use the 'unprofessional' label with Audrey, couldn't I?"

"If it fits, why not?" I agreed.

"This could be about managing good behavior. Sort and share."

"But you know what?" he said, considering. "This doesn't have to be only about managing bad behavior. This could be about managing *good* behavior. Sort and share. Why wouldn't I do this with my high performers?"

"Good point!" I agreed.

"And, to either group I could say, so here's the label, whatever it is, and that's the only thing you and I are going to talk about between now and your next performance review. That would be pretty cool!"

"That is one great idea," I said sincerely.

Creating the labels was easy for Bryan, but he had trouble remembering to use them. As he got better at sorting and sharing, his team began to come under control. That was a large step towards [The Look & Sound of Leadership](#).



Core Concepts

- Step back. Way back. Look at the bad behavior from afar.
- Label what you see.
- Make the label positive.
- Tell the person about the label.
- Share what you sort.

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