Hosted by Tom Henschel

How to Stop Fighting at Work

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Two leaders in a long-running feud both want the fighting to stop but cannot find their way to peace. Their coach gives them each homework to quiet the ill intent they ascribe to the other, allowing respect to emerge.

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Years of Feuding

Josh and Cheyenne had been feuding so long they couldn't remember how it'd started. But it continued radiating heat. When they were in the same space at work, people were nervous about a spat erupting. Their boss, Mike, was infuriated by behavior that to him looked childish and unprofessional.

He told me, "I've talked to both of them. Either they blame the other one or they say they're ashamed of themselves and they're sorry and they'll never do it again. Blah-blah-blah. It's like dealing with teenagers!"

He told me Josh and Cheyenne actually had known each other as teenagers. After her mom's second marriage, they'd become stepcousins. They spent a fair amount of time together and had liked each other. But then things happened. Feelings got hurt but not forgiven. Slights festered into wounds. Now, years later, they were co-workers, and, at fairly regular intervals, one of them could be heard shouting at the other one and a few stormy days would follow.

Mike wanted it to end and asked if I'd ever done anything like this before. I told him that, with

varying degrees of success, I had. He asked what I thought had made the difference.

I said, "People have to be ready to stop fighting. If they want a way out, I can probably help them. But if they're committed to keep fighting I probably can't."

Mike was a realist. "Well, they both *say* they want the fighting to stop. Whether they will or not is anybody's guess."

I began my work by meeting separately with each of them.

Cheyenne began by expressing gratitude for our work together. She told me she felt tired and embarrassed. She was hungry for whatever I had to offer.

So, I listened to her.

Cheyenne's tool: Empathy

I heard how Josh was a big lunk who had no idea how offensive he was. I heard how he always had to be right and couldn't listen to anyone else, particularly a woman who was as smart as he was. I heard about how he intentionally did things just to piss her off. I heard a lot.

Then I asked her what her part in the fight was. How had she contributed to keeping the feud alive?

> **No matter what he does, he's never going to be trustworthy.**

"I don't cut him any slack," she said, quick as a flash. "I see him for who he is. No matter what he does, he's never going to be trustworthy."

"Never going to be trustworthy," I said. "That's quite something! So, you keep the feud alive by denying he could ever have good intentions."

"It's only fair," she said. "He's out to get me as much as I'm out to get him."

"It doesn't sound like you're ready to stop fighting, Cheyenne."

"No, I am," she said. "But really, Tom, it feels dangerous to let my guard down. And listen, I've always been tough. Show me you mean something by doing it, not by what comes out of your mouth. I don't care about your sob story. He *says* he wants this all to stop, but he's not exactly a man of his word. At least not with me. Our customers love him, but not me."

"Could I suggest a piece of homework for you?" I asked.

The question made her happily surprised. “Sure!”

“Let me tell you why this particular tool came to mind. I’m hearing that your heart is closed off to him. He is not trustworthy and you are defended against him. Sound accurate?”

“Yeah!” She took a breath, ready to elaborate, but stopped herself.

The Sound of Empathy

I went on. “If you two are really going to reconnect, one tool I think will help you both is empathy. For you, that would mean seeing him as a person who has feelings and emotions. It would mean opening up to him a little. That would be your homework.”

She did not look enthused. She asked, “How would I do that?”

> **Listen for what possible feelings that situation might have invoked in him.**

“Have empathy. Listen for feelings. You know, I could ask you to listen for lots of things. Certain types of questions. Or people who speak in generalizations instead of speaking for themselves. But in your case, with Josh, I’m suggesting you listen for any situation that might prompt a feeling in him – which is most situations! So, suppose Josh comes to you complaining that you didn’t answer his email for three days. It would be completely natural for you to defend yourself, because on the face of it, he’s complaining about you. But instead of taking it personally, you’re going to listen for what possible feelings that situation might have evoked in him. And you have some empathy. You’d say, ‘I see how that could’ve been frustrating for you.’”

She looked suspicious. “And you're saying we’re both going to do this? He’s going to listen for my feelings, too?”

I nodded. “Empathy might not be the first piece of homework I give him, but at some point, yes, I am sure I will talk with him about empathy.”

In fact, empathy was *not* the first piece of homework I gave Josh.

Josh’s tool: Validation

Josh had been painted by both Cheyenne and Mike as a bull in a china shop. It wasn’t so much that he destroyed things as it was about him being stubborn and taking up all the air. When he thought he was right, he dug in and could be dismissive and mean.

As with Cheyenne, I listened to Josh’s story. He, too, expressed gratitude for the coaching. I

heard that he wasn't sure why this feud was so hard to put to bed, that he was just being himself, which is what he'd always been with Cheyenne. But he'd do whatever it took to cool down the temperature.

I asked him, "If Cheyenne were here right now, and if we asked her why she still gets so pissed off with you, what do you think she'd say?"

> **Other times I do things too fast and *that* pisses her off.**

"It could be a hundred things," he said. "Sometimes she says I don't do things fast enough and that pisses her off. Other times I do things too fast and *that* pisses her off. It's never just one thing with her. I have no idea what would come out of her mouth today."

"Is she unreasonable?" I asked. "I understand a lot of different things irritate her, but are they reasonable things? Can you see her point?"

Grudgingly, he said, "Some of the time."

"But it sounds like mostly you think whatever's bothering her is pretty small potatoes, am I right?"

"They are!" he agreed.

I nodded, then asked. "Can I give you a piece of homework?"

"Homework?" He was a little puzzled.

"Something to think about," I said. "Something to try. Something to remember as often as you can and see what happens."

"Okay," he said, intrigued but skeptical.

"Validation," I said. "Your homework is going to be to validate what you hear from Cheyenne. When she tells you an idea, or complains to you about something, when she tells you what's gone wrong, try to understand what she's talking about and validate what you hear."

"I don't think I can do that," he said. "A lot of what she says I don't agree with at all."

Validation is Not Agreement

"Ah! Right! Absolutely. I am not suggesting you agree to anything, Josh. Validation is not agreement. Validation just says, 'I understand how you think. I see how you got there.' Or 'I

see why you might feel that way. Your feelings are understandable.'"

He shook his head. "She's going to hear that as agreement, no doubt about it. And then she'll use it against me. She'll say, 'But last time you said you would!' or whatever."

> **So, agreeing with her feels like a trap.**

"So, agreeing with her feels like a trap," I suggested.

"Sometimes, for sure," he agreed.

"Then I understand why you two would still be fighting: agreement doesn't feel safe."

"Sucks, doesn't it?" he said sadly.

"I think you could change it if you wanted to," I said.

He gave me a side eye. "How?"

"Validation," I said again. "I understand it feels risky, but I don't think it's that big a risk. I think if you started validating what you hear, just giving a little love to what she says, it could help stop the fighting."

He considered for a second, then asked, "Are you giving her the same homework? Is she going to be validating me, too? Or at least understand I'm not agreeing with her?"

I laughed. "I'm sure at some point she and I will talk about validation, but I haven't yet. Does that matter?"

The Sound of Validation

"I guess not," he said a little sheepishly. "So, can you help me out here? This is really not my style. Not even as a dad. I think I'm good with the 'Atta, girls,' but I don't 'validate' their ideas or 'validate' their feelings. That sounds really awkward."

"I completely understand how it might," I said, validating his idea.

He went on, not noticing. "So, what am I supposed to say? Like with Cheyenne. She says I ought to respond faster to the people in accounting, but there are all sorts of reasons why I can't. So, what do I say? 'Oh, Cheyenne, that's a great idea?'"

"Do you think it's a great idea?" I asked.

"No!"

"Then don't," I said. "Validating isn't about saying anything you don't mean. It's about validating that her ideas have value in and of themselves, regardless of what you think of them."

He gave a knowing smile, and said, "What? You mean there's something here that's not about me? Impossible!"

I smiled and nodded. "If you want to stop the fight you have to give her value. You can't dismiss any part of her."

Cheyenne tried to practice empathy. And Josh tried to practice validation. It was hard for them both. But then they noticed a change. They were each ascribing less ill intent to the other than they had before. They were beginning to see each other as separate adults, each deserving respect, which allowed them to move toward *The Look & Sound of Leadership.*

The podcast episode continues from this point to give the listeners more concrete tools and practical advice for quieting workplace conflicts.

Core Concepts

- **To stop a feud, ask yourself, "Am I really ready to stop fighting?"**
- **Do not ascribe ill intent to the other person.**
- **Respect that the other person's position is real to them.**
- **Validating the other person's position is not agreement, it is respect.**
- **Recognizing the other person's feelings is not permission, it is respect.**

Questions Addressed

Q: How can I stop an ongoing fight with a co-worker who always makes me angry?

A: The conflict will not end simply because you say you want it to. You must be genuinely ready to stop fighting, which means managing your negative self-talk about the other person, like that they "always make me angry." They don't "always" make you angry. Often, perhaps, but not always. Also, you need to be willing to change your long-standing reactions and behaviors.

Q: How can I know what part I'm playing in perpetuating a feud?

A: Ask yourself: What am I willing to commit to? Am I committed to proving the other person is wrong and deserves punishment? Am I committed to protecting myself from further hurt by assuming the worst about the other person? Or am I committed to creating a new outcome, even if it's not perfect at first? Am I committed to giving some grace and remaining calm?

Q: How do I manage my negative self-talk about a coworker who seems to constantly be trying to provoke or undermine me?

A: Recognize that your stories about the other person are just that: stories. They are not truths. Listen particularly for absolutes: "constantly," "always," "never," "every time." Absolutes about people are rarely accurate. (Rarely, not "never"!) Listen also for stories about their intentions or their feelings. You don't know their intentions or their feelings unless they've specifically told you. And even then, those are only words which may not translate into actions.

Q: Is there a practice or skill I could use to help me stop fighting?

A: This episode of *The Look & Sound of Leadership* identifies two practices that can quiet a fight: empathy and validation. Empathy asks you to recognize that the other person has feelings and experiences that are different from yours. Validation asks you to recognize that the other person's thoughts and feelings are legitimate in their own right, even if you disagree with them. Showing respect for the other person's experience does not mean you share it; it is simply a display of respect. Respecting the other person can help quell the fighting.

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