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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Choosing Stories Over "Truth" ▶ 01/10/08

James's expertise was so unique, so prized, that Larry, the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, personally recruited him. James came on board as a star. Less than two years later, Larry had lost almost all confidence in James.

"Every time he talks," Larry said to me, "he stammers and hems and haws to the point where I'm not sure he knows anything at all any more. He's either got to start showing up like the executive we're paying him to be or get out of the way so someone else can do the job."

At our first coaching session, James admitted that talking with Larry made him so nervous he became paralyzed and incomprehensible. He'd felt intimidated by superiors most of his life, he told me, but Larry was *really* tripping his circuits. When I asked why, he said, "When I talk to him, he's completely stone-faced. He looks like he hates me."

"Do you think he *does* hate you?" I asked.

"At first I didn't but now I'm not so sure."

So we analyzed all the data James had about Larry. In short order we discovered that other than Larry's stone-face, there was nothing to support James's fear. So I asked James if I could change the subject on him. He said sure.

Knowing he presented at industry events, I said, "I'd like you to imagine you're doing one of your presentations at a conference. Big screen behind you. Lots of PowerPoint slides. A couple hundred people in the room. You know this picture?"

He smiled. This was familiar territory to him. "Okay," I said, "imagine you're ten minutes into your presentation. Things are going great. Suddenly a woman right in front stands up, makes a big show of searching for her purse, finally swings it up over her shoulder and turns and walks right up the middle of the room and out the doors at the back. What do you tell yourself about her?"

Without taking a breath, he answered, "She hates my presentation."



This imaginary scenario is a wonderful Rorschach test. I use it often because it tests the stories people tell themselves. For a moment, imagine *you* are that presenter and that woman is walking out on you. What do you tell yourself about her? Is your answer like James's? Does she hate your presentation? Or do you make up a story that isn't about you at all—for example, that she had to go to the ladies room?

No matter what you imagine, you've made up a story about the facts. In reality, you have no idea why that woman left the room; you only know that she did. So any motive you ascribe to her is a story you've made up. And the story you make up can be a great indicator of how you interpret situations.

I wasn't surprised that James imagined that woman's exit was aimed at him personally. After all, he'd interpreted Larry's passive, non-expressive behavior as being about him, too. James's story was predictable. And whatever story you made up was probably predictable, too.

Follow this thinking: James's logical mind knew Larry wanted him in the company. James's intellect told him Larry had no reason to hate him. But when James didn't get the nods and encouragement he wanted from Larry, he made up a story that was negative and diminishing and painful. That story didn't come from the logical part of James's brain; it sprang spontaneously out of his beliefs about his relationships with superiors. And, because his story aligned with his beliefs, *he accepted that story as truth.*

The point here is not to try to stop our stories from happening. They happen so fast, so automatically, that stopping them is virtually impossible. And, besides, our stories actually serve a purpose: they help us make sense of the world around us.

Rather, the point is to be aware that a story is happening. Then, if the story isn't helpful, swap it for one that is.

James's story about Larry's impenetrable gaze wasn't helpful at all. So we worked to swap it for one that was: that Larry listened to *everyone* that way, even his wife and children. James wasn't sure that was actually true, but he was willing to believe that story and, as he repeated it over and over, it calmed him down. So he chose to make it his story about Larry's stone-face. "Truth" wasn't the point; self-management and better performance was.



Stories about yourself, your work, your co-workers, your boss, are firing in your head all the time. They're automatic. And your stories are inextricably interwoven with your belief system. So your stories feel like truth. But before you *act* on that chosen "truth," remember: it's probably just a story you've told yourself. Choosing whether to accept that story as truth—and then choosing whether you want to take action based on that story—is the sign of a healthy leader who can regulate him or her self.

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