

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Discussing Difficult Behaviors ▶ 05/15/08

Myra is chief operating officer at a firm that creates massive art installations. She was hired to bring order to what had been a freewheeling artistic organization that repeatedly ran over budget and behind schedule.

During our first coaching session Myra asked if I could help her with Tim, the CFO. “Every time I tell him an idea,” Myra said, “he ends up yelling that I’m ruining the company’s spirit and he storms out. The next day, he acts like nothing happened and says my idea’s great.”

She continued with resignation. “I hate the way he treats me but everyone says he’s always been that way. It feels pointless to talk to him about it. Besides, it’s not exactly a conversation I’m dying to have.”

I told her that speaking up for herself and addressing Tim’s behavior directly felt like an important action for her to take—if she could do it respectfully.

With a bitter laugh she said, “Even if I’m a saint, I bet it won’t be long before he storms out of *that* conversation!”

“Maybe not,” I said, “if you’re well prepared.”

“So what happens? You prep me and then I just wait for him to start doing his thing?”

That was when I told Myra rule number one about discussing difficult behavior: have the discussion when the behavior is *not* happening. Discussing someone’s behavior while they are actually displaying the behavior is like trying to change a tire while the car is going 70 miles an hour: you might be able to do it but your chances of success are pretty slim.

Myra understood, so we talked about how to prepare for the actual discussion. Preparation is crucial. Don’t imagine you can just go in and wing it. The subject is too emotionally charged—for *both* parties.



Here are six steps to help you prepare to discuss difficult behaviors successfully.

1 Identify observable behaviors

Observe the behavior as if you're a video camera. During a successful conversation you'll only discuss behaviors you'd be able to see on video playback. This means you won't talk about motivations or meanings or how upset other people are or anything except observable behaviors. And only one or two of those!

2 Define the impact

Clarify what effect the observable behaviors have on you. This is when you can name feelings—but only your own. Talk about the impact the behaviors have on others only if they've given you permission.

It can be challenging to accurately name your feelings; our "Feeling Word Grid" often helps. If you'd like one, [contact us](#) and we'll email it to you.

3 Practice

Of these six steps, this one is the most important. Don't speak these words for the first time when you're actually in front of the other person. Practice out loud in the car. Or while walking the dog. Or, even better, practice with someone removed from the situation. The more you practice speaking in a simple, direct way, the more likely the other person may be able to hear you. Don't skip this step.

4 Eliminate landmines

Landmines are ways of speaking that incite defensive behaviors or allow others to dismiss your comments. When you practice, listen for landmines and eliminate them. Landmines include:

- ▶ All or nothing thinking: "You always do this!" "You never listen!" "Every time I do this, you do that."
- ▶ Apologizing: "I'm sorry to bring this up but..." "I'm sorry to be the one to tell you." "I don't want to upset you."
- ▶ Accusing or blaming: "When you storm out of the room, you're acting like a two year-old." "You should know better than that!" "You're just not professional."



- ▶ Attributing or speculating: “I know you’re not really angry with me when you storm out of the room.” “I know you don’t mean to insult me when you do that.”
- ▶ Advising: “What you should really be doing is...” “It would be so much better for you if you would...” “Everyone would like you so much more if you...”

5 Speak for yourself

Here are examples: “When you storm out of the room, I get angry and feel hopeless about us working together to help the company.” “When you yell at me, even though we’re behind closed doors, I get concerned about the example we’re setting for our team members.” “When you reject my ideas before I’ve explained them, I sometimes feel I don’t care about getting your input—that I’ll just go forward without you. But I don’t like that option.” Click here for more about [Speaking for Yourself](#).

6 Name the conversation

Create a name for the discussion—not for the behavior, but for the topic you want to discuss. Myra felt a good name for her conversation with Tim would be “Executive Behavior.” That sounded fine to me. So Myra knew her opening line to Tim would be something like, “Tim, I’d like to talk with you about ‘executive behavior.’”

A name allows you to talk about the behavior without blaming. And, in the future, it will allow you to quickly re-visit the conversation—and you will revisit it! Myra might say, “Tim, remember when we discussed ‘executive behavior’?” Or “The way you spoke in that meeting was a terrific example of ‘executive behavior.’” A name helps both parties gain a little distance and safety.

Practicing all six of these steps gave Myra the skill to be confident and focused during her conversation with Tim. And, much to her surprise, Tim remained fairly calm. Over time, she revisited the conversation with him more than once and he began to behave differently with her. She was hugely relieved. Disciplined preparation made all the difference.

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