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Managing Beyond Bad Behavior ▶ 10/30/08

Bad behavior went unmanaged for a good reason

Managing Ted was a nightmare for Bryan. Every day seemed to bring another complaint about Ted's inappropriate behavior. Even people two and three levels above Bryan were complaining. His inability to rein Ted in was making Bryan look ineffectual as a leader.

The problem was that Ted was exceptionally gifted. And everyone knew it.

Bryan led a team of twenty-six artists at a consumer products company. The team's ability to create stunning designs was crucial to the company's success. And none of the other artists could turn out designs like Ted. So when he behaved badly—which was a great deal of the time—no one wanted to challenge him too harshly. There was always the fear that Ted might make good on his constant threat to “quit this crap factory.”

Bryan, himself an accomplished artist, had become a vice-president by being super-agreeable. Now this friendly, conflict-averse guy had to contend with Ted. Whenever Bryan tried to give him feedback, Ted quickly sabotaged the conversation with any number of tactics.

A tool for all seasons: “Repeated Headlines”

I wanted Bryan to have a tool that would stand up in the face of whatever Ted would throw at him, so I taught him a technique I call “Repeated Headlines.” You can use this technique in any situation when the following two factors are present: A) the situation is hard to measure (meaning it's not easily quantifiable like missing deadlines or sarcastic emails) and B) it is ongoing. And when I say it can be used in any situation that has those two factors, I mean it: “Repeated Headlines” can be used with a boss or a spouse or a child. It's terrific to have in your toolkit. Here's how I taught it to Bryan.

First, I asked Bryan to brainstorm all the ways Ted was creating difficulties. In no time he'd built a long list that ranged from suspicious behavior with a co-worker to dressing inappropriately for a client meeting to his outbursts during feedback sessions.

When the brainstorm list was complete, I asked Bryan, “If you could scoop every item on this list into one giant bucket, how would you label it?”



He thought a while then said, "It would have to be something like 'Unprofessional Behavior.'"

"OK," I said. "Before we go on, can you rename the bucket so it becomes a positive, not a negative? It's important that the label point towards what you *do* want, not towards what you don't want. So 'Unprofessional Behavior' would become, what?"

"'Professional Behavior'?" Bryan ventured.

The initial "Repeated Headlines" conversation

"OK. So now you have a list of all the difficult behaviors, and the list has a label. That's step one. Here's what's next. You're going to have a conversation with Ted. And you're going to say something like this:

Ted, I know I've been giving you feedback about a lot of different things. It hasn't been very effective for either of us. From now on I'm only going to give you feedback about one thing. I'm going to call it 'Professional Behavior.' I'll tell you when I think you're doing it well and I'll tell you when I think you aren't. So from now on, the only thing I'll be looking at is 'Professional Behavior.'"

"Ooh, boy," said Bryan, rolling his eyes. "I can imagine his reaction to that."

"What do you think he'll say?"

"He'll probably have a tantrum and threaten me."

"Perfect!" I said. "Then that's your first opportunity to use the repeated headline. Let him say whatever he's going to say. Then, instead of responding to him, you simply say, 'What you did just now is a good example of what I think is NOT professional behavior.' Don't get engaged with what he does. Just give him the repeated headline. That's the beauty of this, Bryan. You don't have to get sucked into his debates or discussions ever again."

Bryan considered that. "So if he gets defensive on me, I don't have to try to calm him down? I can just say, 'That's not professional behavior'?"

"Exactly. At any moment of the day he either is or isn't behaving professionally—and your job now is to let him know how he's doing. It's particularly important to tell him when he's doing it right. He needs



to know you aren't only dinging him when he's out of line. This is a time when positive reinforcement is going to help enormously."

Bryan got to practice on me while I got to play Ted. Bryan learned how hard it is not to get sucked into the bad behavior. But he began to enjoy the strength he gained by sticking to the repeated headline. He was eager to try it out.

"Repeated Headlines" in summary:

- 1 Brainstorm all the behaviors that are problematic.
- 2 Think strategically about the brainstorm list and give it a positive label. (Name the behavior you want in the future, not the problem behavior of the past.)
- 3 Tell the person about this new label and that you will watch their actions through that specific lens from now on. (Note: During this conversation, don't re-hash specific items on the list: keep this conversation at a high level.)
- 4 Give the person the feedback as often as possible—perhaps beginning with the conversation in #3! Don't debate. Don't discuss. Just name what you see and move on. Feedback can be one or two sentences.
- 5 Give lots of feedback when there *isn't* a problem.

In fairly short order, Ted dropped many of his unruly ways. Of course he was never a perfect model of compliance: that wasn't in his nature. But he stopped being the source of so much turmoil. And Bryan received the credit for reining him in. In his turn, Bryan gave the credit to the tool called "Repeated Headlines," one of the powerful techniques of *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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