



The Unintentional Cowardice of Managers

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For some the title of this entry may be quite provoking. In my line of business if constructive change is going to take place you need to prod and provoke along side encouraging and motivating.

AN EPIDEMIC

One of the biggest challenges in organizations, depending on the perspective, is the inability of some managers to step up to the plate and have the much needed difficult conversation. From my experience, I find this to be epidemic in the number of companies that I work with irregardless of the business or industry.

What I'm addressing in this entry is the conscious, deliberate act of managers avoiding the tough conversations required in order to resolve a behavioural issue or performance problem. There are numerous reasons as to why these dialogues fail to happen.

WHY DO MANAGERS AVOID DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS?

Let's take a step back for a moment and employ a cognitive-behavioural approach to understanding why some managers seem to be incapable of having a tough conversation or holding someone accountable.

You will find that in almost every case it is the habitual thought patterns a manager has toward conflict and staying 'liked' that forms the foundation to as to why they avoid difficult dialogues. These same thought patterns are triggered anytime there is the hint of a possible confrontation with another person.

This is understandable if we adopt the view of seeing conflict as a negative thing where the fall out is the irreversible damage to the social relationship. From this perspective we can understand why the behaviour of some managers is avoidance instead of approach. You can almost see the thought bubble over their heads, "Please, oh please, let this issue resolve itself!"

The reason I use the term unintentional cowardice because I know managers don't consciously choose to be cowards when dealing with tough issues that test the waters of human relationships. In most cases, they are driven by maintaining a civil and friendly working relationship. They want to be seen as the nice and fair manager. In those cases when a person is promoted to

manager over those who were once his/her colleagues there is the overwhelming drive to stay as 'one of the gang'.

When you see the motivations of some managers from this point then you can understand their intentions. But this reasoning is completely counter intuitive if seen from the perspective of maintaining a dynamic and functional human relationship.

A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

If you ask most people what they think about conflict in the workplace they will tend to see it as something they would rather avoid. I fully support this when conflict is only destructive and negative. But in order for an organisation and it's people to survive and thrive an alternative perspective of conflict needs to be adopted.

I find cowardice has a much smaller chance of poking it's head up if managers begin to see conflict in terms of being constructive. Where conflict is about developing, supporting, and being transparent. When managers take on this perspective I literally see a change in how they handle difficult conversations.

When you gain greater context and definition of conflict, you immediately trigger new thought patterns. If managers are encouraged to take this approach then these thought patterns begin to form new habits. New cognition triggers new behaviours. New thoughts evoke new actions and responses.

THE SOLUTION

When I am working with managers to help them adopt a fresh perspective to conflict it is important for them to share with me initial conflict means to them. Depending on what they tell me I will tailor my approach. (Listing the approaches is beyond the scope of this entry).

One important element is to put managers through training to teach them how to give and receive feedback and to handle difficult conversations. But in order for the training to be effective it can't simply be a course on communication. Otherwise it ends up like the manager is simply reading from a well-prepared script. If this happens the recipient will see it as insincere and superficial.

Any training needs to include teaching the fundamental dynamics of what makes human relationships work, by including key elements of cognitive behavioural psychology that address the habit of thought toward conflict. At the same time, an element on the 'hows' and 'whys' of the social brain in building and maintaining strong team cohesion should be integrated into the training. (<http://bit.ly/1OtPwBV>)

IN CONCLUSION

The unintentional cowardice of managers can be thwarted by teaching them about their own habits of thought that drive them to avoid difficult dialogues. When you tweak the habit you change the behaviour. From my experience with coaching managers, almost anyone can learn to professionally deal with constructive conflict while maintaining healthy, working relationships.

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