

Leading News

Helping Successful Leaders Become Even More Successful

#22: Whose Side Are You On? By Patricia Wheeler

Nobody likes difficult conversations. Dealing with conflict is one of the most challenging leadership issues for the technically gifted executives I coach. We know a conversation will be difficult when we feel anticipatory dread or anger. Another clue is procrastination; we put the conversation off until a “better time.” These issues then become overt conflicts when that better time never comes. The resulting scenario isn’t pretty and often erodes trust between the parties.

We complicate matters when we assume that the parties are on opposing sides. The challenge is to find the side that both parties are on...something which both can agree is a shared goal or outcome. It might be as lofty as a mutual investment in the company’s survival or competitive edge. At worst, the shared “side” may be both parties’ investment in an amicable separation.

I don’t like these dialogues any more than my clients. I faced a difficult conversation with our college age daughter when a recent review of credit card charges yielded major sticker shock. Her expenses had far exceeded our expectations.....upon careful inspection, we found an upward trend had existed for over a year. We had to talk.

A good beginning was essential. Would I lead with righteous indignation or create a “coaching conversation?” At first glance, this seems a silly question: who in their right mind would decide to lead with righteous indignation? But we do it all the time; we simply don’t acknowledge we’ve made this decision.

First I had to find the side we were both on. Focusing on the immediate situation was insufficient; I had to see the bigger picture. I also knew that giving advance warning of a difficult conversation is helpful and creates better results.

Keeping in mind my wish to conclude with some agreements and action steps, I began, “Amy, we need to talk about a difficult issue.” After explaining my concern, I said, “My intention is not to criticize you or make you wrong; it’s to help you make good budget decisions as you become self-supporting.”

It’s crucial to talk about our own part in the problem. This minimizes focus on who’s right and wrong and sets the stage for generating solutions. Leaders often contribute to problems by lax management and tolerating problems they hope will go away. To Amy, I said, “Our part in this is that we didn’t clarify our expectations and communicate them clearly to you.”

When both parties have improvement agendas and must collaborate to find solutions, defensive reactions are less prevalent. As this issue will require ongoing discussion, I suggested an initial action step. I asked, “May I request that you not use our credit card unless we discuss the expense in advance?” She agreed and I thanked her for having this difficult discussion with me. We’ve since had several productive talks on the subject, and we both feel respected and listened to by the other.

Here are five keys for turning a difficult interaction into a solution-focused coaching conversation:

1. Find a way to first understand, then get on the same side. To do this, you have to put yourself in the other person’s shoes. Sounds easy, but when we’re upset, it’s

Subscribe at www.LeaningNews.org

Contact us by phone at 404 377-9408 or by E-mail at Patricia@LeadingNews.org

tremendously difficult. In influence strategies, this is called “bridging” – acknowledging what is of mutual interest or intent to both parties.

2. Acknowledge your part in the issue and claim your own improvement agenda.
3. Make requests for change, not demands (Note: this is not easy).
4. Acknowledge the other for hanging in there. (Note: easier than you may think, and it creates great relationship traction)
5. Craft a next step that both of you agree to and a time to revisit the issue.

Result: a conversation that both parties feel good about, presently and in retrospect. These conversations work much better than the shame and blame game. As far as I know, defensiveness has never produced a positive business result.

Action Step: Think of a conversation you need to have but have been postponing or getting angry even thinking about having. Identify your shared outcome – then have the conversation, being conscious and deliberate in leading with (and never forgetting) the side you are both on.

Copyright 2006, Leading News

Patricia Wheeler is an executive coach and consultant who helps smart people become better leaders. As Managing Partner of the Levin Group LLC, she has spent over 15 years specializing in organizational systems dynamics and coaching senior leaders. A distance-learning expert, Patricia uses an action-oriented and results-based approach to coach teams within global organizations, leading to increased synergy and bottom-line results. She publishes Leading News in collaboration, renowned executive coach Marshall Goldsmith. You may contact Patricia by E-mail at Patricia@TheLevinGroup.com or by telephone at 404 377-9408.