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Navigating Difficult Conversations
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Are there any specific behaviors that have a consistent and profound effect on how well a manager is able to get things done? That is the question that was asked by a handful of researchers. To help answer the question, they asked senior executives to identify twenty-five good managers and twenty-five great managers. The researchers were told the names of all fifty managers, but they weren't told which of the managers were considered to be good and which were considered to be great. It was their job to see if they could discover who the senior executives thought were the great managers and what made those managers markedly better than the good managers.

As the researchers followed the fifty managers, they recognized that the managers' daily routines, such as how they handled their inbox, did not impact performance. But not long into the study, a particular behavior began to stand out. This behavior so substantially contributed to performance that the researchers were able to predict by looking at this one behavior which of the managers were rated as good and which were rated as great with 100% accuracy.

Such results beckon the question: so what did they discover? What was the difference in behavior among the fifty managers that so impacted performance that senior management took notice? According to the research the answer was this: The difference among the good and the great managers was a function of their ability to handle conversations when participants in those conversations did not agree with one another and felt strongly about their position. When these kind of conversations came up the "good" managers tended to do one of two things: they either avoided the real issues out of fear of an emotional backlash or they spoke up in ways that damaged relationships. This contrasted with the "great" managers who consistently addressed the difficult issues in constructive ways.¹

When I read of these findings, I was surprised in one sense. I have read my fair share of leadership books in my days, as perhaps you have. In those books there is a good deal on the importance of communication

and on the importance of confronting the real issues in an organization, but I had never read anything that so strongly pointed to one factor being the difference between good and great management.

But there was a second reaction to this research, and it was perhaps more personal. It involved the recollection of my own personal history. I took a quick personal inventory of those times when I felt like I led effectively and those times when I did not. And the factor that seemed to best explain the difference in results was my willingness or unwillingness, ability or inability, to navigate discussions when opinions differed and when they were laden with emotions.

And my guess is, you would say the same for yourself. Whether it has to do with conversations with your superiors, your co-workers, your neighbors, or your own family, your ability to address and not side step the real issues, and to do so in the midst of and not the absence of differing opinions and emotions, makes a big difference in how things turn out.

With that said, let me share with you a few ideas that might help you find more success than failure in situations where the “stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong.”² These are the suggestions made by the researchers mentioned earlier.

First, we need to make sure we don’t make the goal of our conversations winning. Conversations that are made into zero sum games in which one person wins and the other loses rarely work out. Instead we are better off if we make our goal the injection of information into the situation.

Imagine having to address a boss who is calling on all kinds of cost cutting measures, but who seems to be going forward with a needlessly expensive proposition in one area. You can in those situations tell him or her of their hypocrisy, or you can share with your boss that you have noticed a lowering of morale among your co-workers because of what they perceive as a difference in cost-cutting standards. The first effort creates a win-lose scenario. The second effort adds information to the situation and allows your boss to learn something important, and perhaps you too if there is good reason for inequitable cost-cutting.

Or consider a conversation you might have with friends who are contemplating divorce. If you are of the persuasion that divorce is not good, you could just tell them that is it wrong to get a divorce and basically create a win-lose scenario. But I have not found that approach to help much. Much better it seems to add more information to the pool of their decision-making process by asking them if they have considered all the options for saving their marriage and all the consequences they will experience if they do get a divorce. A counselor once told me that when he took this tack he became much more successful in helping people stay in their marriages and work through the differences.

Second, it seems best when difficult conversations must be had that we seek a solution more than the airing of our grievances. When a kid is not cleaning his room or a co-worker is not pulling her weight, the aim shouldn't just be to tell them you don't like it and demand that they change. The aim should be to find a solution to the problem. Having the finding of a solution the aim keeps the conversation more of a dialogue than a reprimand and leaves space for you to learn something about the situation that you may not have realized beforehand. Haven't you ever gone in to tell someone you don't like something only to find out later you didn't have all the facts. How much better then to have as an aim the discovery of a solution than just a downloading of frustration and the demand for change.

Third, whenever possible we must work to maintain the longer-term relationship when having difficult conversations. We can all tell someone who reports to us we are highly displeased with their performance on a recent project, and do so in a manner that makes them freeze up, become entrenched, or just quit. But if we do that we rarely have done ourselves any good in the process.

Charles Schwab, not the broker but the steel baron of the early 1900's, had ordered that smoking not take place in his steel mills. One day when touring a mill he saw some men smoking under a sign that read, "No Smoking." He had the authority to chew out those men and even fire them. But instead he handed each man a cigar and asked them that when they smoked to please do so outside. Scolding them would have

been legitimate; but Schwab's method not only got the job done but created long-term loyalty among his employees.³

Or consider this story. Just days before the Battle of Gettysburg, President Lincoln appointed George Meade General of the Army of the Potomac. Meade led the battle well and Lee retreated, but he did not feel it best to pursue Lee. When Lincoln found out, he was furious. He penned a rather strong letter, but decided not to send it. You see, Lincoln knew Meade was a reluctant leader, and that he had also just led a significant victory at Gettysburg. Lincoln needed to communicate that he would have rather seen events unfold differently, but to be too harsh in his words would have probably led to Meade's resignation and been hurtful to the larger cause. Lincoln understood that keeping the relationship and winning the war was more important than venting in the moment, and so the initial harsh letter was never delivered.

Finally, it is important when situations are charged, yet need to be addressed, that we are careful what kind of stories formulate in our minds regarding people's intentions. If you are honest, you will probably admit to times when your mind came up with wild scenarios about how evil someone is and that the reason someone is doing something is because of x, y, or z. That kind of thinking rarely represents reality and just isn't very helpful in keeping your own emotions in check during any upcoming conversation.

In one of the early letters written to the Christian church, believers are told to "take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). The idea is that it does no good to let things spin wildly in our mind that have no basis in fact or that do not seek the goodness of God. And it seems we do well to heed these words and not let stories grow in our minds such that they become more real than what is really true about a person or situation.

So the next time you need to address a tough situation remember to avoid a win-lose scenario, and seek the addition of information into the pool of understanding. Have as your aim, not just the speaking of your mind, but the finding of a solution that keeps the relationship intact. And finally, watch the stories that spin in your head. Shut them down as soon as you can and let facts rather than fantasy rule the day.

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- ¹ See "[Crucial Conversation 4: Building on a Decade of Results](#)," A Vital Smarts® Position Paper, 2-3 for an explanation of the research cited.
- ² Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzer, *Crucial Conversations* (McGraw Hill, 2012), 3. This book represents the source of the suggestions that follow.
- ³ Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (Pocket Books, 1998), 199.

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