

CULTURE COACH CLASSIC: “DUDE, IT’S YOU!”

A client called during a particularly difficult time. He was just a year into his new role as a CEO and was starting to regret his decision to relocate his family and join an organization that he thought he could lead into a promising future.

At the end of a soul-searching, sleepless year he'd lost 87% of his executive team, morale was at an all-time low, and he had two lawsuits filed against him by disgruntled employees.

We got together to talk about what he wanted, and his vision for the company. He'd dreamed of a management team that would be creative and innovative, who rolled up their sleeves to get the hard work done, who were willing to challenge the status quo and develop loyalty and commitment inside their programs and departments. He wanted the organization to elevate its status as an “employer of choice” in the community, a place where people loved to come to work, felt valued and engaged and gave amazing customer service. He wanted to be known in his industry as a progressive leader, modeling quality and productivity while maintaining or exceeding industry standards.

He was genuinely in earnest. He really wanted to be a great leader and make a difference.

One of the toughest things about my work is that I promise to tell the truth. Granted, there's a difference between respectful honesty and brutal honesty, but in the end it's all about sharing what I see in front of me that's verifiably true. As a consultant and trusted advisor, my clients pay me to give it to 'em straight.

The night before I'm scheduled to talk with a leader is the hardest. After conducting a cultural assessment, 360 survey, or a series of team interviews, I'll often have to confront the client with the verdict: “Dude, it's you.”

In other words, it's not those terrible, lazy, minimally performing employees, cantankerous partners or difficult suppliers. It's you. The leader. The person where the buck stops . . . right here.

This was the case with my well-meaning CEO. Although he had a great, compelling vision, some of the problems he was

encountering had either been instigated or enabled by him. He certainly wasn't the cause of all of the poor behaviors and choices, but he was responsible for dealing with them. And, most important, there was a big gap between his intentions (which were grand) and his behaviors.

His team perceived him as controlling, closed, and intimidating. Whenever they might show up to challenge the status quo or come up with something creative, as he'd told them he wanted, they were met with resistance, yelling and an unwillingness to listen. He was confusing people because he'd say one thing but then he'd do another. Plus, no one ever really knew the good heart and earnest intentions he had for the organization the way I did, because he'd never actually told them the way he'd told me.

If this leader sounds a little bit like you, maybe you need to have an honest conversation with yourself:

1. Are my intentions and behaviors congruent? Do I practice what I preach?
2. Am I sharing my Big Vision for the company or team? Does everyone actually know what's important to *me*, in addition to our financial goals?
3. How am I inviting truth-telling in my organization? Can people come to me with honest feedback and questions?

It's never too late to do the right thing. So even if you've had a painful realization that “Oh, wow . . . it could be *me* . . .” you might just want to take a closer look at how you're supporting or hindering your company's success. And sometimes, frankly, it takes the help of an interested, trusted outsider who's willing to help you and your business grow. **RO**

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