

## COMING TO GROUND: COURAGE AND VULNERABILITY

Years ago, I sat with one of my executive coaching clients to have our beginning-of-the-year meeting.

We'd been working together for several years, with a focus on strengthening his leadership skills, improving his team's performance and morale, and ultimately improving the company's bottom line.

He was a bright, powerful presence with an earnest heart and a super-quick brain. He walked fast and talked fast and often got distracted. And as a result people had a hard time with him, even when they liked him and respected his business acumen.

His interpersonal skills were clunky at best, and he regularly alienated people with his insensitivity and lack of awareness. We worked on this, knowing that it's often a leader's strong interpersonal skills that are the differentiator for his/her success. A brilliant business mind can never make up for the damage that alienating and devaluing one's team members and peers can wreak.

We talked about language, framing, and understanding the context and content of conversations. We worked on emotional intelligence and the inefficiencies of poor communication. We practiced empathy and listening, and each year he set goals and got a little better. His team were hesitantly regaining trust, stepping forward, starting to innovate.

Somewhat regularly, we would prepare for a meeting or a talk, and I would watch in disbelief as he would begin to wander down the same old paths we had talked about avoiding. Oh, noooooo, I'd think. You did NOT just do that. And I longed to be able to stick to his side, so I could give him a swift kick in the shins whenever he started to come unglued. I couldn't believe that he was still able to undo everything he'd work so hard on, with a single quick off-base comment or outburst of shaming.

When I work with my coaching clients, we typically start by taking time for some self-assessment, plus maybe a cultural assessment to check perceptions, and then the client identifies his or her goals for our coaching.

The goals are generally behavior-based, or mindset based, and we use real-time scenarios from their actual working life to try out new ideas, skills and practices. It's a magic dance when it works – and it very often works well – because I get to be the trusted advisor and coach who's helping behind the scenes while the client does the hard work, showing up, trying out new insights, and being courageous in ways they've not felt confident or competent before. Or just recognizing where their edges are, the frontiers of their own emerging leadership style that they've not yet explored.

This time, at this meeting, I decided that I would tell him what I thought his goals should be for the coming year. Having watched him, I felt

confident that there were sabotaging behaviors that were getting in the way of his progress, and I was sure that just hinting or waiting around for him to discover them on his own was no longer the humane thing to do. I always offer but don't impose: "Feel free to ignore me." I offer options and advice and invite them to consider: "Yours to explore or ignore."

I said, "I think we need to focus our coaching and your development in three areas this year. First you need to lead from the front. You cannot ask anyone to do what you're not willing to do, whether it's a particular focus, or risk-taking, or research. You must walk your talk."

He nodded in agreement. "Second," I said, "you must increase your specificity in your communication and feedback, including both positive and negative elements. In other words, stop getting angry with your people for not reading your mind. And stop withholding specific praise and recognition when it's warranted. Instead, I want you to practice higher levels of specificity both about what you want and also about what's going well with your team."

He nodded again. He could do that, too. "Finally," I said, "you need to be more vulnerable." Uh? What? Where he'd been nodding, he stopped right there. "What do you mean by 'vulnerable'?" He wasn't wild about the idea. I began, "You need to be more honest and sincere in your interactions. If you don't know the answer, don't bluff it. Stop trying to be the smartest guy in the room, and be willing to be curious and investigative. Admit when you're wrong. Show some humility. Be willing to take ownership and step up."

I'd like to say that he dove right in and was perfect, but he wasn't. Vulnerability, unlike what people commonly think, is not about weakness. Vulnerability is about recognizing your humanity, taking risks, and coming to ground in your own courage.

When we're willing to be vulnerable, we are more open, aware, and willing to learn. This leader's team needed to see his humanness, as much as they didn't need to experience any sort of superhero antics from him – because they needed to be able to trust him. It takes vulnerability to step into the innovation arena or the creativity circle. It allows us to hear and see differently.

Where can you step to the edge of your own vulnerability?

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