

Your Fears: Name Them and Defeat Them



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"All we have to fear is fear itself." -- FDR

Let's admit it, working with and leading folks who think, look, talk, and live different from us can be a little disconcerting. Sometimes we don't quite know what to say, how to say it, or even how to feel. All that uncertainty can accumulate until we find ourselves downright afraid – afraid to act, afraid to speak, afraid to make decisions.

It's natural to be a little uncomfortable. Studies from universities such as the Universities of Michigan and North Texas have shown that it takes time for diverse team member to feel comfortable together. What is wrong – and unwise – is if we let that discomfort prevent us from making the kinds of decisions that will lead to a truly inclusive workplace.

How Does Fear Interfere with Our Ability to Manage Effectively?

There are many areas in which fear compromises our ability to lead effectively, but here I'd like to focus on the area that I believe is most important: Coaching.

Have you ever hesitated to coach someone or provide honest feedback for fear that they will then think you homophobic, racist, or sexist? Yes, that can happen, but, think of it this way: Aren't biases like racism, sexism, homophobia and all the rest based in disrespect? In turn, can you think of anything much more disrespectful and patronizing than refusing to provide honest feedback?

The fact is, reluctance to be honest about a person's performance is a sure-fire way to make certain that members of your team feel excluded ("My manager doesn't care enough about me to tell me how to improve"), de-valued ("My manager doesn't value me enough to bother tell me how to be better at my job") and disrespected ("My manager doesn't respect my abilities enough to feel that I am capable of improving").

In the end, the employee fails to receive the feedback he or she needs to be a true contributor. You've shortchanged the team member and, in the course of it, shot yourself in the foot.

How Can I Diffuse My Fears?

The good news is that just identifying and naming the fear that tempts us to pull our punches on honest feedback has a way of reducing the emotion's ability to dictate our behavior. On the surface, this may seem like an irritating example of psycho-babble, but think about it for a minute. Have you ever had a wonderful emotional experience the

memory of which you expected to treasure forever only to have the emotion diffused by recounting the event in detail one time too many?

That's exactly what I'm talking about here except, in this case, we want to get rid of the emotion, not cling to it. Basically, this involves identifying what we felt and analyzing the emotional juice out of it.

So, how do we do this?

The easiest way to get a handle on what we fear is to look back at what has bothered us in the past. Here's a simple activity that is bound to help. Give it a try and share it with your team – you'll be surprised how much you'll learn.

Step 1: Think of three specific times when you have had to coach someone different from yourself and felt even the slightest degree of hesitation or discomfort. Pull up as many details as you can about the incidents: When did they take place? How well did you know the person you were coaching? What was the nature of the feedback you needed to deliver? What was the physical setting? The more physical and contextual detail you can conjure, the more you will be able to recall how the event made you feel.

Step 2: Name the feeling. After each incident, list the emotions that you felt at the time. I deliberately won't list those possibilities here so as not to influence your recollection. In any case, avoid judging yourself no matter what you might have felt – this activity is about self-awareness, not about self-criticism.

Step 3: Try to figure out just what elements of the situation caused you to feel as you did. Be as concrete as possible. Were you uncomfortable because of the background of the person you were coaching? Did you feel on shaky ground because perhaps you hadn't documented past behaviors as much as you might have? Did you know you were justified, but had previously been falsely accused of bias so couldn't stand the thought of it happening again?

For our purposes here, the specifics of a given fear are not the point. The point is the process – getting into the habit of identifying our emotion and, thereby, increasing our ability to get it out of our way. The more practice you have in naming and, thereby, defusing your fears, the easier the process will become.

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