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SIT DOWN AND TALK: 6 STEPS FOR PRODUCTIVE COMMUNICATION

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As an executive coach, I help people find their own answers to business' most pressing problems. Today I had an answer to give: you people need to sit down and talk. Irreverent? Probably. But when the third executive in a row claimed victimhood after a particularly tense meeting, it was time to blow the whistle on the blame game. It was time for these folks to take responsibility.

For the sake of example—although you can probably find some examples of your own—here's what happened.

The controller of an organization identified a very large error to the tune of \$40 million.

Her boss, the vice president of finance, wanted to give the CFO advance warning and let her know they were working on uncovering both the cause and the solution for the problem.

His boss, the CFO, flipped out over the news. She called a meeting and staged an angry tirade, which involved not only cursing but finger-pointing, threats, and admonishments.

The controller felt belittled and threatened to walk out of the meeting.

The vice president of finance said nothing and took the rest of the heat.

Every single one of these typically very professional, thoughtful people called me to complain.

Now, as a coach, I certainly believe in the importance of an objective ear. Coaches can help you analyze a situation with some objectivity, explore your reaction, determine your contribution to a problem, and define some solutions. What a coach *can't* do is communicate for you. At some point, it's time to do the work yourself.

This is especially true when points of view conflict as directly as they did in this circumstance. Consider the different perspectives these three people held.

The CFO felt enormous pressure, since she would be the one to communicate the bad news to the president, the board, and the shareholders. While she could admit she'd lost her cool, she felt justified since she had been kept in the dark about a trend no one had spotted. She blamed the controller for not finding the error sooner and the VP of finance for not bringing her more information or any solutions.

The VP of finance, for his part, felt sorely accused for delivering a message that he thought the CFO would want to know as soon as possible. He thought that keeping his mouth shut in the meeting was the fastest way to weather the storm.

The controller was positively baffled by the explosion of emotion on one hand and the lack of support on the other. What she did know was that she had a right to a respectful workplace and was simply doing her job, in good faith, for the company.

So who was right and who was wrong?

All I can tell you is that's not the right question. It almost never is. After all, you can go to your grave chanting, "I was right; they were wrong;" at the end of it, you'll still be dead.

A much better approach is to do what these execs should have done in the first place: get out there and find a solution. And that requires communication—direct, reflective, respectful communication.

In the absence of this kind of conversation, the three people involved in this scenario face a difficult task: correct a multi-million dollar error publicly when three of the key players were too angry (or too scared) to talk.

Instead, what they really need is a good heart-to-heart. They – and anyone caught up in the blame game – can start with a few good questions:

1. What went really well that we need to acknowledge?
2. What went badly that may have caused some problems?
3. What needs to change in order for us to prevent this from recurring?

In addition, each of the people involved needs to do a little private sole-searching:

4. What part did *I* play in this situation? How did I contribute to the problem?
5. What could I have done more effectively?
6. What do I need to do to repair any damage I may have done to my reputation, my relationships, or my career?

Once everyone has thought these things through privately, it's time to sit down and talk. And that brings us back to communication.

The first step in good communication for this group, or any one like it, is to set an intention to work together. Before they can come to resolution on this issue as an intelligent, functioning group, they must agree to stop insisting they were wronged and start looking for a way to make it right.

The second step is to agree to talk when everyone is calm, in an atmosphere of trust and humility. Hot tempers, blaming, and politics get people into these situations; cool heads, compassion, and forgiveness get them out.

The third step is to address the issue directly. Sweeping problems under the rug only piles up dirt, whether the issue is a potential financial catastrophe or the tone of voice one person used with another. In this case, both are the issue, and both need to be addressed. You cannot ignore what you don't want to face and expect it to simply fade away. The questions above provide an appropriate structure for this kind of post-mortem talk.

By following these three steps to communication, people who have gotten themselves in a bind create an environment in which they can move on. The truth is, *everyone* in an ugly situation must shoulder some responsibility for allowing it to happen. And everyone must take responsibility for solving it.



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