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LOL: Reducing Conflict on your Team

Tension, friction, and conflict are common in the workplace. Especially when pressure is high. One skill in particular helps to reduce conflict and build trust. It sounds very simple but is very difficult in practice. The skill is this: don't attack people. By "attack" I don't mean finding the nearest sharp object and jabbing someone. I mean verbal attacks. Statements like, "You're pushing us too hard" or "You're taking all the credit for our work." Some might say that these aren't attacks, they are statements of fact. Well, they're not. Sorry. They are your stories about events. The facts might be: "You have asked me to fill out three RFPs by tomorrow." (My story is you're pushing too hard.) Or, "In the meeting, when we discussed the work we did together you said (insert: actual quote)." (My story is that the boss thinks you did all the work.)

The key skill involves stating the facts accurately, and then OWNING your story and your reaction. And NOT attacking. If we look more closely at the first example above, it would unpack as follows:

1. **Fact**: You have asked me to fill out three RFPs for tomorrow. (Check with your boss, is this accurate? Does she agree?)
2. **Story**: That is unreasonable. The work load is too much.
3. **Reaction**: I feel overwhelmed, fearful, and angry. I don't want to let the firm down, but I don't think I can accomplish it in that time frame.

Notice in the **reaction**, there is no "you" statement. The person is not blaming or criticizing. Rather they are reporting their own internal reality, which is unarguable. Whatever they think and feel is, well, whatever they think and feel. You may see it differently, but their reality is their reality.

Here's the point: there is absolutely no way to reduce conflict when one or both parties go on the attack. A typical exchange might sound like this:

Person A: You don't get your work done on time.

Person B: That's because you are expecting too much. You're pushing too hard.

Person A: No, it's because you don't manage your time well.

Person B: No, it's because you schedule pointless meetings that take up our time.

And so on. The natural response to being attacked is to counter-attack. Or to retreat. Fight or flight. Any attack will trigger this physiological response. You will get an aggressive response or a passive-aggressive response. Neither of which reduces conflict or build trust and rapport.

So, what's the solution? First, recognize this common pattern of attack and counter-attack. It happens continually in relationships. It's human nature. But it's not effective. And it won't help. Second, watch for when you are being attacked or delivering an attack. Learn to take a beat—or a breath—and avoid the urge to counter-attack. This is hard, especially on pressure-packed days. (Believe me, I know: I'm married with teenagers…) Sometimes it's easier to practice awareness by watching others in meetings. You'll see this pattern continually of attack, counter-attack. And you'll see it's not helpful.

The paradoxical solution is to do the opposite of attack: relax—if you can—and reveal your own reality. Calmly and respectfully. "I know I missed the deadline, and I feel guilty. I'm asking myself what happened and how I can do better. I really hate letting people down." This sort of honest and vulnerable response usually changes the tone of the conversation altogether. (After all, it would look like "kicking someone when they are down" if the attacker kept attacking. Read: blatant bully.) Again, the technique we're offering here is to simply make "I" statements about your own reality. Reveal what is true for you. Resist attacking back.

Here's the problem. For most of us, in the moment, it feels more satisfying to smack the other person back. And that approach is rampant in the world. Politicians smack each other in debates, soap operas thrive on revenge plots, sports stars power up and shout down opponents, and self-help books tell us not to be doormats. It's very counter-cultural to take the non-violent approach. But it's the only one that's effective. (Note: some bosses do successfully bully people into submission, but that never builds trust or loyalty. Just resentment. And a culture of fear.)

In practice then, the best statement to make when you are attacked may be, "I don't think we're going to get anywhere if we attack each other." I've seen this statement—or a variation of it—work to end the battle and at least hit the re-set button. Please don't misunderstand this advice: I'm not saying, "eliminate accountability from your culture." Not at all. Set goals, make agreements about achieving them, monitor progress over time, provide feedback when falling short, and reward people for success. But don't create a culture in which attack and counter-attack is the accepted means of dealing with differences. It won't work and it will destroy trust and rapport. The only path to successful outcomes is for each party to take responsibility and own their part. And then discuss it in safe, non-attacking ways.

If you succeed in doing so, you'll become a "1%er." Not referring to income, but to the percent of the population who are self-aware and mature enough to practice this behavior. I confess I'm not quite there, but I'm getting better. "My name is Jim, and I'm a recovering attacker." My wife and teenagers are appreciative of my efforts.

JW