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CAREER STRATEGIES AND INSIGHTS

A Case Study in Leadership Vulnerability

The Situation

Michael is a Vice President at a fortune 500 organization. The dynamic on Michael's team was rather informal and he enjoyed a very relaxed relationship with his direct reports. The informality, however, did at times interfere with the extent to which Michael communicated clear expectations. Additionally, his direct reports were not seeking clarification when they did not understand his expectations. Nor did they demonstrate an appropriate level of accountability for timely deliverables.

As a result, a frustrated Michael would often swoop in to grab the ball and run with it when his expectations were not being met. This frustrated his direct reports. As a result they began to put less effort into their work. They assumed that whatever they delivered would not be good enough for Michael, who would eventually redo their work anyway. This cycle of behavior was not only negatively affecting Michael's team, it also negatively impacted how his team was perceived by the larger organization.

"Imperfection is a human condition; we all suffer from it."

Taking Action

Among the things that Michael and I discussed was his ability to be vulnerable. I think of vulnerability as the removal of one's mask to allow for an open, honest, and transparent exchange of information. Michael, like most of my clients, cringed at the mention of the word "vulnerability" and responded with "I can't do that, what will people think?" My response is always the same, "Imperfection is a human condition. We all suffer from it. People will think that you are human and your relatability will sky rocket."



I didn't think that Michael had bought into my thinking until this happened.

During a facilitated session with Michael and his direct reports, the topic of his "swooping" surfaced. His direct reports shared how Michael's actions affected their confidence to do their jobs. I was surprised when Michael responded in a tone unusual for him, "I don't like to fail. My fear of failure is what drives my performance and my behavior." As you can imagine, that was a watershed moment. All the anger and frustration that once swirled around the room had vanished. The team finally understood Michael's "why."

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The Moral of the Story

While Michael's transparency did not address the issues of clear expectations and lack of accountability, it did help his direct reports understand him a lot better. It also opened the door for a conversation about the issues. There is value in demonstrating vulnerability. It is honest. It increases understanding. It reveals information that allows others to provide support. It demonstrates your humanity and frees you to be yourself.



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Tips for leveraging More of Your Own Vulnerability

1. Use coaching conversations to share a personal story about a failure you experienced and overcame. This will enhance your relatability and your approachability. As a result, you will hear about performance challenges sooner, be able to address them in a more timely fashion, and enhance the overall performance of your team.
2. In conversations with your direct reports, peers, and colleagues get comfortable admitting when you do not have the answer and invite people into a collaborative conversation to “figure it out.” Not only is there synergy in collaboration, but this approach will go a long way in strengthening your relationships.
3. Finally, reflect on the constructive feedback that you have received over the years. What themes surface? Think about what might be driving your behavior. In Michael’s case, his swooping was related to his fear of failure. Share your awareness with your leader, a coach, mentor, or trusted thought partner. Together identify ways to address the behavior. Again, in Michael’s case, we talked about the importance of communicating clear expectations and holding his direct reports accountable for deliverables. With his direct reports, we discussed the importance of asking for clarity when they did not understand Michael’s expectations. We also talked about increasing their levels of accountability and commitment to timely deliverables.

It seems appropriate to close this post with a quote from Brene’ Brown, the thought leader on the topic of vulnerability. “Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage. Truth and courage aren’t always comfortable, but they are never a weakness.”

Dr. Kym A. Harris is President and CEO of Your SweetSpot Coaching and Consulting, LLC. Her clients are high performing and high potential leaders and executives who are known for their strong performance. Her belief that “competence is more than performance” is fundamental to her coaching model which is fueled by the principles of Emotional Intelligence. She is the coach that helps leaders discover, develop, and explore their more.