



The Signature Voice

the quarterly newsletter for clients and friends of Isis Associates

“In the Heat of the Moment” – Why It’s Really Not About the Other Person

With the heat of the summer, many of our clients are feeling the dial get turned up with difficult relationships at work. Regardless of context, the net has been the same: “let me tell you what is wrong with the other person”, “he/she did something to me”, “I can’t believe his/her behavior.”

Sound familiar? Now, add up the costs in productivity by staying “hooked into” the drama of your favorite workplace “villain”. When we realize that we can’t change others (despite all of our attempts to control or manipulate), the real question becomes how can we leverage our most difficult or tension-filled relationships into learning and growth opportunities for ourselves?

1) Get in Touch with Values

Take Linda, a senior leader in a professional services firm, constantly at odds with Tom, a peer. Linda would spend hours in coaching and with friends replaying the details of their interactions. “You should have seen him in this last meeting – as usual, poking holes, seeing only the negative, and being condescending.”

Rather than keeping the focus on Tom, we challenged Linda to shift the focus on herself – what was her reaction to Tom telling us about Linda and her values? For two weeks, she tracked when she felt aligned to her values and when she experienced a “values violation.”

Linda uncovered two things – first, she had a value around supporting and acknowledging others and being supported and acknowledged by others. She was pleased to describe how her values had manifested in her leadership style and relationships with staff, clients, friends, and family. On the other hand, Linda took pause at the realization of unspoken expectations she had of others to hold these same values. She realized when these were absent in her interactions, she experienced frustration, anger, and vulnerability to the opinion of others.

2) Discover New Development Opportunities

When Linda was upset about Tom, she would talk about “Tom’s “selfishness, putting himself before others, and wanting to be in the limelight” – all behaviors she felt were in violation of her values of teaming and collaboration.

At the same time, Linda’s recent promotion to a more executive level, did require that she place more emphasis on market place visibility and be more judicious in her use of time to meet executive responsibilities. Linda spoke of feeling exhausted and wishing she had more time for herself and family.

The big irony of our often perceived “nemeses” is that they help to shine light on the very parts of ourselves we are in conflict with or unconsciously have not come to terms with. For Linda, she needed to see the fine line between upholding a value of teaming versus being a martyr to protect a self-image of “being a good person”. While it was difficult to acknowledge, she realized what Tom was especially adept at – setting boundaries, personal self-care, and networking in the market – were the very skills she needed to add to her repertoire to achieve better balance and continued success.

3) Remember the Power of Choice

For Linda, a new sense of empowerment emerged when she realized perhaps this was not about Tom, but herself and her own habituated reactions to Tom, which were within her control.

Linda realized rather than staying in a “victims stance”, she had choice in sharing more directly her expectations with others – i.e./ “for today’s meeting, I’d like to first hear the positive aspects about what’s working well with the new systems interface. And then, in the 2nd half, I’d like to gather your ideas for continued improvement.”

With Tom, she actually found new perspective as she reflected on his values of self-sufficiency and marketplace production. Their relationship improved as Linda took things in her own hands to be more forthright about who she was and what she expected while also aligning to her values by supporting Tom and acknowledging his values.

The next time you find yourself charged up, remember Ronald Heifetz's phrase, "Going to the Balcony" to step back, gain your composure, and look at what's going on from an objective place. Is your frustration actually a 'values violation' with someone else – how can you share your expectations and values while also learning more about the other's person's values and expectations? Is there a conflict within yourself that the other person is bringing to the surface in an uncomfortable way?

Use your painful reactions to others as an opportunity to hold up the mirror. Use that information to drive more intentional, strategic choices for how you communicate and choose to engage. Who knows, one day, when looking back, you may actually be thankful for all that relationship offered.

- Amy Jen Su

Quarterly Reflection: Taking Things Personally

"Don't take anything personally...nothing others do is because of you...when you are immune to the opinion and actions of others, you won't be the victim of needless suffering...personal importance, or taking things personally, is the maximum expression of selfishness because we make the assumption that everything is about "me". (Don Miguel Ruiz, Author of the Four Agreements)

Take a moment to reflect on a recent difficult interaction with another person:

- 1) Did you take it personally? Did you blame the other person for the interaction and feel victim to judgment, insult, or comments?
- 2) How did you react in the situation? What other choices did you have/do you have in responding?
- 3) What have you learned about your values or potential areas for growth based on your interaction?

Quarterly Book Selection:

What dog-eared, highlight-filled books are on our bookshelves that we find ourselves turning to time and time again and frequently recommending to others? Here's our book selection for this quarter:

The Power of Half

There are so many reasons why The Power of Half is our book selection this quarter. First, some background, the book is the real story about a family who upon their 14-year old's urging, sold their Atlanta mansion, downsized to a house half its size and gave half the profits to charity. And no, this was not a crunch-granola tree hugging family - - the mother was a partner at Accenture and the father worked for the Wall Street Journal. As a family, their quest became to answer the following: "Do I give enough? How much is enough? How can I make an impact in the world?" Not only was their giving an impactful outcome of their quest, but as importantly, the strength the family built in the process is priceless. So why do we recommend this book:

- Imagine if the leaders of your company every now and then let themselves be inspired and urged by a not so senior member of the organization such as the parents of this 14 year old did. What would it net out?
- Imagine if companies were primarily driven by a vision articulated through the following questions: "Do we give enough? How much is enough? How can we make an impact in the world?" What would the state of our business environment be?
- Imagine if we "downsized" to what we need vs. what we want on a personal level? What would work-life balance mean?

And there are so many more musings that this book inspires. The author rightfully states, Body Shop Founder, Anita Roddick to frame the concept: "If you think you're too small to make a difference, you've never been in bed with a mosquito." The Power of Half captures the essence of the impact we can all make both as individuals and as a collective group whether at the family level or the organizational level.

- Muriel Maignan Wilkins

From the Coach's Corner: "AIM" to Get Your Team Engaged

From the Client:

"It's been a tough cycle for teams in my organization – we downsized our staff, increased our scope with clients, and cut many benefits, like bonuses and training. I feel like I am doing what I can as a leader, yet I'm seeing the effects on my team in terms of engagement and motivation. What do you suggest?"

From the Coach's Corner:

Keeping your team and yourself for that matter, engaged when the environment is tough is no small feat - and you're not alone. Employee engagement is a hot topic for many organizations right now and a discussion point with many of our clients. Employees are burnt out, and now that companies are hiring again, your top performers are a target of your competition. The good news is that it is easier to motivate your teams than you think, and it goes well beyond financial motivation. There's no doubt that you're feeling stretched as well, given the circumstances. Keep in mind that how you manage and express your own level of engagement is critical. Employees model the behavior that they see and the "ripple effect" is even more powerful in difficult situations. Being able to articulate why you are engaged and motivated is a great start, and *feeling it* is even better. Get clear on what keeps you excited about your organization and then move on to your team. We've seen engagement increase when leaders help their team: 1) blend accountability with autonomy, 2) continuously learn and self-improve, and 3) identify with the organization's purpose. Consider the following steps and questions:

Assess accountability

When we are accountable for specific actions and have the freedom to accomplish them in a way that feels natural to us, we perform better. People think, feel and behave differently when they have a sense of autonomy and control over their time, tasks and the people they work with. Even a little bit of autonomy translates into increased engagement. Think about what you hold your team accountable for and how much you control their direction. The goal is to provide a sense of following the direction, not orders. Set the stage, and give the team latitude to execute.

- What "controls" can you let of go of, while still holding the team accountable?

Improve continuously

Challenge your team, and not just with the hours they work! People are inspired when they have a sense of continual self improvement and an opportunity to learn. When we're learning, whether it's how to be a better cook or a better leader, we feel more committed because we're rewarding ourselves with our own improvement. Leverage this desire for improvement by creating an environment where the team can learn through different projects (small or large), have increased responsibility, or time together to share ideas and challenges. Simplicity is key in this step – every individual has a desire for their own improvement that's unique. Simply giving them time and space to do some of the things they enjoy, will go a long way in keeping them engaged. As one client told me, "My partner gave me the opportunity to present my work to the senior executive team – it showed me that he was confident in my work and that it was going to have impact on our mission. Plus, I got an opportunity to show that I was capable of being in a room with that level."

- When can you give your team the time and space for a new challenge or continued growth in a favorite area?

Manage purpose

It's the age old "what's in it for me" question. Every organization has a mission, and the rubber really meets the road when you can consistently articulate the mission and how the team fits into it. We all need to feel like we're contributing to a purpose where we are valued. A mission statement leaps off of paper when every one of your team members can see that what they do on a daily basis contributes to the shared purpose. We know that we each have our own value systems, and place different emphasis on what's important. More often than not, we focus on celebrating big victories and forget about the many contributions that get us there. Most people just want a sense of purpose and acknowledgment that they add value. Consider adding or increasing simple recognition programs where you can recognize your team member's unique, signature contributions to the shared purpose. Recognition reinforces a person's feeling of accomplishment and will help ingrain behavior that has positive impact on the organization's mission.

- How can I celebrate with my team to consistently convey that their work is aligned with the mission?

My sense is that the answers to these questions will help you, and your team, get even more engaged. *AIM* to get the answers into practice and share what you've learned with the team.

- Erin McCants Parker