

CORPORATE CO-DEPENDENCY

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I want to tell you about the lunch I had yesterday with two corporate clients (John and Larry). These were two regional directors in a several hundred million dollar a year corporation who immediately started the luncheon conversation off by complaining fiercely about their boss (the vice president of their division).

I heard them say things like, “she’s a power and control monger”, and “you have to be careful what you say to her or you’ll pay big in the end”, and “you can’t take an opposite view from her or you get grilled with questions until you agree that you were wrong!”

Maybe you have dealt with someone in authority like this in your company, and I’m sure you have heard colleagues discuss these types of issues.

Ever wonder what to do if it happens to you? Interestingly, most people who say they hate it are actually doing something to perpetuate it!

Here are some helpful and important considerations and skills to develop. I began by asking John and Larry to tell me why they seemed so angry with this vice president. They, of course, looked at me like I was crazy and said, “obviously, that’s because she’s so controlling!” I then asked them to describe their behavior in response to her.

I specifically wanted to know how forthcoming they were, how much of an edge they had in their voice when they were conversing with her, and how upfront they think they appeared to her.

Here's what I got. They were not at all forthcoming. They probably both had a clear edge or irritation in their voices when exchanging with their boss, and they both doubted that she saw either of them as particularly upfront and disclosing.

I then asked them to tell me how they would feel if they were managing someone who dealt with them that way. They both got this shocked look and literally dropped their eyes to the table.

I then began to talk to them about how we can inadvertently keep a process going that we admittedly dislike! How we can actually perpetuate a process that we hate!

In a word, we talked about fear and the need to manage it directly and appropriately. You see John and Larry were participating in a corporate co-dependent relationship.

Co-Dependency has to do with a destructive need for approval and an unreasonable fear of rejection. Both feared that they would suffer dire consequences should they decide to be forthcoming.

I spent some time showing John and Larry how they were reverting to passive anger to avoid adult honest communication. You see, it is easier to play the role of victim than it is to relate in an adult, productive manner. John and Larry were upset about their VP's behavior which has been ongoing for years, but neither one of them has ever addressed a word of it to her.

When asked why, they both said they feared consequences. When prompted further, they each acknowledged that they simply didn't know

how to go about it! It just felt too awkward to do it, and they weren't sure what to do if in fact their boss did get upset with them. We talked about the need for approval and the need for professional integrity.

We talked further about behaving in a way that we simply don't respect ourselves for. John and Larry were compromising their self-respect and personal integrity by keeping a passive aggressive control drama going.

This process, of course, applies to all types of relationships, not just business ones. But, in this case, neither of these men really felt good about their behavior. I urged them to approach their boss in a spirit of cooperation and purpose. To go to her and honestly try and change the way that they relate.

Let me ask you this. Have you ever behaved a certain way in a relationship to either get a desired response or avoid an undesirable response from someone important (boss or otherwise)? Of course we all have. Now, what if that behavior is dishonest and, well, phony?

You see, there comes a time when we need to stop being so concerned about the other person's response and focus more on preserving our own self-esteem. We do that by handling ourselves in a way that is honest and professional.

Now, I know some of you are saying something like, "...wait a minute! If I'm honest it could cost me my job!" I'm here to tell you that if you are not honest it could cost you your job and your career. Here's why. Top executives need people who are secure and strong enough within themselves to communicate honestly and productively. Here that as it is intended. We are a rare commodity if we can communicate honestly, effectively, and productively.

Here's what that means. If we can go to our superior (VP, President, CEO, etc.) and input to them in a respectful, purposeful way, we come to be a highly valued source. Rarely are we so perceived if all we are is a mouthpiece who glibly endorses everything. Top executives want and need the input most when their ideas, behavior, and styles are troublesome.

You see, everyone can have a blind spot. If you have the courage to give feedback about an idea or style that you see negatively affecting the corporate team, and if you can do so in an honest, productive manner, you actually insure your corporate tenure.

If you, however, are not well skilled at giving feedback about delicate issues you certainly have other options open to you besides becoming passive aggressive. You could even suggest some team building exercises to help grow all of the team members. Or, you could set out with an executive coach to help you with some strategic communication skill enhancement. But, whatever you do...don't remain passive aggressive! It'll bury you in the end, both personally and professionally.

For more than 25 years, Dr. George Dempsey has been helping executives build strong teams, lead their people, and build a positive culture in their organization. His experiences as a successful entrepreneur, clinical, and corporate psychologist provide unique insights into the dynamics of all relationships, career and personal. He can be reached at (281) 332-3558 or www.drdepsey.com

