

Power Struggles: What They Are and How To Avoid Them!

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When I was 16 years old, I did construction work in the summers to make money for school clothes. One particular summer, I got a job as an electrician's helper and was paired up with this crusty, gruff-talkin, tobacco-spittin, old goat that I will never forget as long as I live.

His name was Einecke (like Meineke the muffler shop only without the M)...I never knew his first name. On my first day, he just barked, "I'm Einecke, get in the truck." I told him my name but that was it; we drove in silence to the job site, got out of the truck, and he grunted, "set up the pipe vice!"

We worked that day, Einecke and I, without two words exchanged that didn't involve orders! He would spit and say, "cut me a piece of 3/4" conduit 67 1/2" long and thread it. I would dutifully go out to the truck, get the pipe, cut it and thread it and bring it to him. Problem was, typically when he would go to install it, he would yell, "dammit, YOU cut the pipe too long...I told you to cut it 67 1/8" long!

Now, I was just 16, but I knew how to measure and when this drama became a part of our 'daily routine', I first tried to explain and he would tell me to shut up and go get something. I'll tell you it didn't

take me long to totally hate going to work, and it didn't take me any time at all to absolutely come to hate Einecke! I decided to get through it by showing HIM that he couldn't get to me. Of course, he was getting to me big time.

Do you have someone you work with that gets to you like this? It leads to pent up frustration and apathy, and it affects your entire personal and work experience. In fact, if you don't deal with the real issues, productivity suffers and you can spend so much time doing psychological warfare that it becomes consuming.

In my case with Einecke, I got to the point of repeating to him his measurements and orders and writing them down in front of him and that cut out a lot of his wrath.

He would just glare at me and I found myself just glaring back at him. I know my eyes screamed out my hatred and disgust for Einecke. I sometimes would leave the job at the end of the day and literally cry because I just felt so powerless, trapped, and abused.

As my hatred grew, I vowed to get even with this old man (he probably was in his late fifties...really old, huh?). I sometimes would just think about hauling off and knocking him on his can and screaming, "I quit...stick this job you know where", and then storm off. But, I needed the job. On my next to last week of work, and believe me I was counting the days, we had to go to a liquor store and replace their 8' fluorescent light fixtures. Einecke turned to tell me to, "get the ladders, boy", but I was already on my way back from the truck with them.

At any rate, we set up the ladders, and we climbed up to 12 feet to dismantle the old fixtures. As we went down the ladder and then returned back up with a new fixture, I spawned a plan. We were about ten feet apart and below us loomed hundreds of liquor bottles. I got to the top of my ladder first carrying my end of the fixture and waited for Einecke to negotiate his remaining three feet. I waited for him to reach the top of his ladder and reach up over his head to secure his end of the fixture when I did it.

Gently, but deliberately, I started to push my end of the heavy fixture TOWARDS HIM! Immediately he began to lose his balance and got this sick look on his face that I'll never forget as long as I live. It was as though he knew he had had it.

He looked at me glaring at him... just about two inches from toppling him over ten feet down into the liquor bottles.

At that instant, it felt like time stopped. I looked at him and glared; he looked at me pathetically and there it was. I couldn't do it. I righted him; we hung the fixtures in total silence. We returned to the shop, and he fired me by just saying, "You're fired". I went to the car ashamed, embarrassed and angry. Einecke and I had developed a classic power struggle and all the emotional garbage that follows.

Fast forward with me now three decades. I'm a corporate psychologist who works with CEO's and other top executives to help their firms develop a culture of greatness, understand the dynamics of leadership, and create strong teams.

Know what I see? I see a lot of situations like my experience with Einecke! I see top executives compete destructively. They

actually weaken their firm by their need to have power OVER each other instead of developing abilities to compliment each other.

Have you ever been in power struggle? Have you ever worked with someone who, no matter what you did, you couldn't please? Have you ever felt like you've really made a contribution but it just seemed to never get recognized? Or, have you ever said, "Why should I be loyal to this firm, when they don't respect or appreciate me?"

If you want to create strong teams, power struggles have to avoided or they will act like an emotional cancer to communicating and working in harmony.

Have you ever felt like your team just wasn't quite what it needed to be? That it didn't function, well, anywhere near as well as you know it can? Or that your key team players just aren't as up front and as open with you as you say you would like? The cause may be a power struggle. Here's what to do about it.

First take a look at these questions.

Number one: Do I listen to my team members? Or, when they're talking am I preparing my rebuttal in my own head?

Number two: Do my team members approach me with information? Or, do I seem to always be the one approaching and asking?

Number three: Do my team members seem to be too competitive with each other?

Number four: How do I respond to input different from what I really think is right?

Number five: How often are personal needs (consideration, help, input, frustrations) addressed in a team setting?

Number six: How often do I find myself arguing over who's right?

Don't say it, Model it! Like it or not, you're the leader, and you are constantly under the viewing glass. Great teams do have Great Leaders. Yes, you are held to a higher standard, but you don't have to be perfect.

What you must realize is that you don't have to be right, but you do have to be real!

Try this. In your next board meeting, ASK your board of directors these questions listed above (or ask your company officers these questions, or if you're a department head, ask your branch managers these questions, etc.)

Here's the crucial part...

You have to let your team know you're serious about this. Yes, actually tell them once again how important it is to you and to your company's success to develop the strongest team possible. And now, ASK them what THEY really think needs to be different.

Then...listen.

No matter what the outcome is with this type of meeting with your team, the victory is that you've begun the PROCESS of healthy change.

Now I challenge you to have regular team building meetings. Get a facilitator to help you make sure that honest communication is unfolding and help you with your own change process. Don't start

and let the process get awkward and then stop it because everybody is uncomfortable.

Remember, it's more important to be real than it is to be right when it comes to team building (and life for that matter).

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.drdempsey.com.