

Improving Your Leadership Fitness

A recent fitness magazine featured an article on the physical effects of being overweight. It focused on a prevention program that shows high school students what it feels like to be overweight by having them spend a day wearing a backpack full of rocks--30 pounds worth!! Later, students discussed the strain and pain in their back, shoulders, and feet, and the agility and lightness they felt when they were able to let go of the weighty burden.

Recently, an article in Psychology Today focused on the destructive effects of holding grudges. This reminded me of the students and their backpacks full of rocks.

Many of us are carrying backpacks filled with "rocks" of grudges and blame. And while the backpacks may be imaginary, the toll this weight takes on us and our performance, in business and life, is very real. This "weight" is the topic for the next two issues.

"Anger is a wind that blows out the lamp of the mind." -- Anonymous

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Grudge holding doesn't make us bad people. It's part of the human psyche. Research indicates that early humans used it as a survival mechanism--a way of identifying freeloaders who weren't contributing fairly to the hunting and gathering of the group, yet expected a full share of the "goods". These ideas of fairness and justice, especially in the effort-reward link, still exist to this day...one reason there is societal condemnation for corrupt politicians, welfare scammers, unethical business executives, and anyone else we deem as trying to cheat the system.

However, the challenge for today's leader (and we're all leaders on some front) is that our personal "fairness radar" can develop beyond such obvious cases of malfeasance to include small slights.

The need for complete fairness can actually hinder your ability to lead and progress, as you subconsciously avoid trusting people or situations in which you might not get a perfectly fair shake. Psychologists call this "injustice collecting"--the condition of accumulating or tallying up unfairness in dealing with others. Those who engage in such accounting are constantly adding rocks to their backpack and become both physically and emotionally weighted down.

The "payoff" for people who engage in injustice collecting is the (fleeting) sense of nobility, superiority, and justification. If I'm outraged over perceived slights you have done to me, I get to be "right" as you are "wrong." In my mind, I get to be better than you.

But this doesn't work. Beyond "two wrongs don't make a right," lies a deeper problem; people who make a situation about themselves, and their need to be "right," give up their right to lead in that instance. Leadership, making progress in any situation, focuses

on influencing others, not the cheap thrill of being right.

Losing Weight

Breaking the cycle of injustice collecting begins with noticing when an interaction with a person has you upset and assigning blame, what some call the "Should Mindset." As soon as your mind begins to think that "he/she should have done that" or "I shouldn't have to do this," you lose your capacity for leadership as you begin to make the situation revolve around yourself. As I tell my clients, "should" is a very judgmental word.

Instead, realign the situation to preserve your leadership of, or relationship with, that person and the situation.

First, recognize that you are upset and that it is OK. Everyone gets upset. The key is *not* to become upset about being upset! This behavior increases the load in your emotional backpack and leads to your internal story-telling about the other, their lack of trustworthiness, and the harboring of grudges.

Leaders are able to recognize when they are in the state of upset and rapidly move through it by forgiving the person who upset them and themselves for being upset. Forgiving clears your mind of the clutter surrounding the upset and allows you to be present in the moment to solve the problem.

After extending forgiveness for the upset, leaders move to solve the issue at hand by *reframing* the situation for action.

Turning "Should's" Into "Could's"

One of the most powerful tools I teach clients is how to reframe the "should" situations. It starts with turning your "shoulds" into "coulds" (or, in some situations, "want to's").

For any given upset, first simply write down all your "shoulds" about yourself, the other and the situation. Next, substitute the word "could" for each of your "shoulds." Notice how new pathways for action begin to occur to you. You'll see what you could do to influence others, to better lead through the breakdown to resolution and improvement.

For instance, "Tim *should* get his reports to me on time" becomes "Tim *could* get his reports to me on time." Then your "leader's mind" can generate ideas about what YOU could do to help him do what HE *could* do. For example, you could tell him about your upset and make a clear request for when reports are due or you could find out what is preventing Tim from getting his reports to you on time and then remove the roadblocks.

Forgiving and reframing enable you to maintain your leadership, and your relationship, and work toward a positive solution rather than being bogged down by the weight of the grudge and upset.

Suggestion: Spend the next week really noticing when you are becoming upset about someone and their actions. Forgive them, looking deeper into the situation by reframing

your “shoulds” into “coulds”. This opens up possibilities. Not only will you find yourself getting more and better work done, you will find your emotional backpack lightening and your leadership fitness building.

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