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How We Lead

Practical wisdom for leaders and coaches

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Dear Amiel,

I am pleased to provide the November 2007 issue of How We Lead.

Leading When You're Ticked Off

Getting ticked off at someone else is a great opportunity to practice leadership. So, too, are those times when we realize someone else is peeved at us. Counterintuitive? Perhaps, but we all get angry, and it's the tough moments that often distinguish good leadership from mediocre leadership. For these moments present us with a choice:

- Take the low-road paths of emotional withdrawal-leading-to-resentment (both well traversed by others, habitual to us, and what people expect) OR
- Take the high-road path of skillful emotional leadership (unfamiliar to us and others and therefore a pleasant surprise to all).

What differentiates high-road emotional leadership from low-road emotional leadership? Three things: our intent, our body language, and our verbal language.

- **Intent:** Who are we taking care of when we respond in tense moments? Ourselves? The other person? Nobody? When leading from the high road, we take care of ourselves, the other person, and the relationship. All three.
- **Body Language:** Each of us has habitual ways of moving our bodies when we are ticked off. Some of us cross our arms. Others point fingers or bang fists. Many of us show our anger in our faces. By becoming aware of our habitual body language and shifting to something new, we can reshape how we feel and how others perceive us. (For a fascinating view of how facial muscles reveal emotions across cultures, see Paul Ekman's book *Emotions Revealed*).
- **Verbal Language:** Few of us are taught the verbal language of high-road leadership, and an equally

small number has role models to show the way. This makes it both challenging and rewarding to learn such language once we are well into adulthood. It feels like learning a foreign language. Because of this, I spend a good portion of my time with leaders suggesting new words and asking them to practice these words with me and with others.

The remainder of this article provides examples of verbal language that has proved useful in heated moments.

Eight Language Strategies for High-Road Leadership

Before giving examples of skillful emotional language, I'd like to address a concern that leaders often express to me. "These new words feel artificial," they say. "How can I say these things and still be myself?"

My response to this concern goes like this:

- "If I propose language to you that feels 0 percent authentic--in other words, you like neither the words nor the intent behind them--then give that language the boot. Otherwise, you'll feel lousy, and others will see you as phony.
- Any language that feels 100 percent authentic isn't adding any value. It's just more of the same. And you'll get the same outcome. I can only assume you are not fully satisfied with this outcome, because otherwise you wouldn't be here talking with me.
- Effective language feels 50 to 75 percent authentic. In other words, it doesn't reflect the person you have been in the past, but feels at least partly like the person you are becoming.
- Speaking in new ways makes you a new person--not completely, of course, but enough to have an impact on your leadership and your relationships with others."

In this spirit, I offer eight language strategies that characterize high-road emotional leadership: The Paraphrase, The Gentle Probe, The Pause, The Three Breaths, The Timeout, The Do-Over, The Slow Mo, and Name That Emotion.

1. The Paraphrase

A simple way to avert escalation and promote mutual understanding is to repeat back what we have heard--in other words, to paraphrase. Let's say Bob has just told me that my report was late. I feel hot under the collar and am tempted to defend myself or attack him. Instead, I say, "Bob, let me make sure I understand you. What I'm hearing is that you received the report from me after I promised it. Is that correct?"

Paraphrasing like this may seem pointless, but it actually accomplishes two things. First, it allows me to make sure I am hearing what Bob actually said, rather than what I think he said through the distorting filter in my head that is listening for

evidence of distrust. Second, the very act of paraphrasing helps me connect with Bob at the very moment I feel like fighting.

2. The Gentle Probe

Probing means asking the other person to tell us more about what happened, what they think, what they feel, etc. Returning to the example of Bob, I might say, "Bob, I'm guessing that the late report had a negative impact, and I'd like to hear what that was from your perspective. Would you be willing to say?" Or, "Bob, it's very important to me to deliver things on time, so I'm curious: was this an isolated incident, or are there other examples I should be aware of?"

Said with sincerity (at least 50% sincerity!), the gentle probe can quickly shift the dynamics of a conversation and relationship. It is so unexpected--one might even say, so bizarre--that it may just shift both people out of their habitual patterns.

3. The Pause

Sometimes the difference between escalating and reconnecting is five seconds. This is how long it takes to pause, take a breath, and consider an appropriate response. When you notice yourself getting upset, try this:

- Acknowledge what's been said: "I'm hearing that [rephrase what the other person said]"
- Declare a pause: "I'd like to take a few moments to digest that."
- Pause
- Choose an appropriate response.

4. The Three Breaths

This one is simple: When you're ticked off, take three deep breaths, and then respond. You can combine this with The Pause or any of the other strategies.

5. The Timeout

What about those times when a five-second pause or three breaths isn't enough? What can you do when you're so hurt or angry that anything you do or say will lead to a conversational explosion, harming you, the other person, and the relationship? One solution is to call timeout. The steps go like this:

- Declare a timeout. You can say something like this: "I'm realizing that despite our best intentions, this conversation isn't going so well. Let's take a timeout and come back to this in 30 minutes/tomorrow/next week. Will that work for you?"
- Calmly walk out of the room, step away from the conversation, remove yourself from the phone conversation, or otherwise separate yourself from the action. Graceful exits are nice, but sometimes a clumsy

exit beats hanging around until things escalate.

6. The Do-Over

Let's say you suddenly realize in the middle of a conversation that you've put your foot in your mouth by saying something that is harmful to respectful dialogue. While the first instinct of many of us is to either berate ourselves or ignore it, there is another alternative. We can simply acknowledge we've taken a wrong turn and adjust our response. For example, right after you've started to criticize someone else, you might pause as you catch yourself, take a breath, and say, "Wait-let me rephrase that. What I mean to say is that ____"

7. The Slow Mo

Another strategy is to slow down the conversation, or at least your part of it. This can include:

- Talking more slowly
- Pausing more frequently while you are speaking
- Letting other people finish speaking. This can be difficult when you are triggered, because your first impulse will likely be to put up a shield, fight back, or withdraw. Letting other people finish means continuing to listen even when you're upset.

8. Name That Emotion

Most of us have a habit of reacting emotionally without knowing which specific emotions are driving this reaction or where they come from. In other words, we don't own our emotions. Our emotions own us. The result is that we either end up in stupid fights or hold in our anger until it boils over or gradually seeps out as constant low-grade irritation. An alternative is to name our emotions to ourselves and others. Books like Marshall Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication* detail how to do this in different situations. Here are some examples:

1. "When you said no to my request, I felt disappointed because I need your support."
2. "When you interrupted me in the meeting this morning, I felt hurt because I am committed to contributing my ideas."

The basic structure is this: "[Name], when X happened, I felt Y because I value/need/care about/am committed to Z."

A Recent Example

Two hours ago, our kitten, Bela, bit me on the finger while I was petting her. My first instinct was to yell at her or hit her. Instead, I said, "Bela, I just observed you biting me. Is this correct? (The Paraphrase) Was it something I said? (The Gentle Probe) Wait, I need a moment to really feel that bite (The Pause)." After taking Three Breaths, I realized my finger still hurt and I had done nothing to deserve this, so I said, "Bela, I know that both our intentions are good, but I don't

think this conversation is going so well. Let's take a minute here" (The Timeout).

When I came back ten minutes later, I reached out to pet her, only to feel her teeth dig even more fiercely into my finger. I started to curse, then caught myself, said, "Let me rephrase that" (The Do-Over) and very slowly (The Slow Mo) said, "Bela, when you bite me, I feel furious because I value positive relationships, and how can I ever hope to coach people to take the high road when I can barely take it with my own kitten?" (Name That Emotion).

Without missing a beat, Bela began to purr, I smiled, and all was well.

Cool Books

Here are three books I am currently reading:

The Leadership Dojo by Richard Strozzi-Heckler. A wonderful book about developing "the body of a leader." Draws upon powerful practices from the martial art of Aikido, like centering, facing, extending, entering, and blending.

What Type of Leader Are You? by Ginger Lapid-Bogda. The second book by Lapid-Bogda about the Enneagram, a nine-point system for understanding the way people think, act, and make meaning of their experiences. Each chapter highlights a dimension of leadership--like knowing the business, leading high-performing teams, and making optimal decisions--and describes the strengths and developmental opportunities for each Enneagram type.

Return to Greatness: How America Lost Its Sense of Purpose and What It Needs to Do to Recover It by Alan Wolfe. An engaging and provocative take on what it means to be great as a country. Sober in its assessment of today's politics, imaginative in describing what we can accomplish together based upon past achievements. A valiant stand for the principle that we are all in this together--whether we realize it or not.

I welcome your comments and questions.

Warm regards,

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