Is aggressiveness in a leader good or bad? The answer is – both. Considered a strength, when associated with a drive for results, a willingness to take risks, and the pursuit of new business, aggressiveness becomes a weakness when it erodes interpersonal relationships. Indeed, in today’s competitive business climate where the ability to work with people is critical, overly-aggressive behavior derails individual careers and undermines organizational effectiveness.

An overly-aggressive leader is harsh, belligerent, bullying, autocratic and generally insensitive to the needs and feelings of others. Leaders of this ilk tend to be excessively demanding and primarily focused on tasks and results with little or no regard for the people around them. In today's workplace, where workers frequently know more about their jobs than their supervisors and where individual responsibility and assertiveness are expected, this type of control and command leadership is inappropriate and ineffective. Leaders who stimulate productivity and creativity and decrease turnover are those who excel at building teams and motivating others, not those who rely on a crusty and insensitive interpersonal style.

Five Steps to Becoming a "Partnership" Leader

Many of the executives we coach are, in fact, striving to overcome this self-defeating, ultra-aggressive, approach to managing people. Our initial goal with these businessmen and women is to guide them toward decreasing their insensitive behavior, while maintaining the positive, results-oriented aspects of aggressiveness. While adverse behaviors such as being overly-competitive, highly-reactive, and quick to show anger are rarely eliminated completely, there are several ways to tone down undesirable behaviors and mitigate their impact. New behaviors are also introduced that lead participants to a more respectful, equitable form of leadership that foster a partnership approach to getting things done.

1. Gaining a "Total Picture" Assessment
One key step in the coaching process is to gain a complete and balanced assessment of the leader in question. Gaining this over-all perspective is achieved through accumulating specific evaluative data, including a "360 degree" survey containing input from bosses, direct reports and peers. Frequently, these assessments indicate the adverse behavior of the overly-aggressive leader has eroded trust and undermined relationships. A comprehensive assessment provides a road-map for the steps to follow.

2. Creating a Role Model & A Trusting Relationship

The role of the coach is critical in that it provides a model for the type of behavior the executive should emulate. The ability of the coach to build a trusting, supportive relationship with the participant will, in fact, determine whether or not the executive will be successful in adapting his or her behavior in new, more effective ways. For example, the participant will experience the effects of receiving affirmation and reinforcement and hopefully be encouraged to begin using these techniques when dealing with others. During the coaching process, the participant will be treated as an important person with value, which is the way he or she needs to treat others both personally and professionally.

3. Identifying Alternative Positive Behaviors

Participants are encouraged to try new behaviors to replace the detrimental, overly-aggressive behaviors they have learned to rely on. These alternative positive behaviors are quite distinct, each spelling out what the participant should say and do in a specific situation. For instance, when a problem with a customer arises, and executive who normally would bark orders and demand that his employees respond in a certain way would be coached to pause and reflect before reacting to the problem. He would be advised to then ask his employees for input on how the problem should be solved and support them in implementing their suggestions.

4. Experimenting With Alternative Positive Behaviors

After being introduced to the alternative positive behaviors, participants must try them out in their work environments. They should experiment with each new behavior one at a time until improved results and relationships are apparent. On occasion, we will role play an interaction in a coaching session, video-taping it so the participant can review his behavior and become comfortable with it before implementing it on-the-job.
5. Staying Cool Under Pressure

Executives need to be aware that it is extremely easy to fall back on old, negative behavior when facing difficult situations or unusual stress. Extreme diligence must be practiced to remain on track during these challenging moments. Ironically, it is during these times of added pressure that there is even more of a need to deal with people as a partner rather than as an adversary. It is the difference between joint problem-solving and finger-pointing.

**Partnership Makes "President's" Goal a Reality**

One executive who recently participated in the coaching process epitomizes the possibilities that present themselves when a partnership mode of leadership is adopted. "Tom" was a long-time employee, who had steadily moved through the ranks of his company. His ultimate goal was to be named president of the company, which was a mid-sized business in the services industry.

Tom was typical of many aggressive leaders in that his company valued the positive aspects of his performance including his relationships with customers, superiors and peers. But the were equally concerned with the negative aspects of his aggressiveness. These included being consistently and relentlessly harsh, demanding, critical and demeaning to those under his supervision. It was made clear that until the negative behavior was corrected, there was no chance he would be named company president.

The turning point in the coaching process for Tom came when he viewed his behavior during an in-depth, video-taped interview. When he talked about his boss, peers or customers, he was animated, enthusiastic, smiling, and positive; but when he talked about each of his staff, his behavior changed markedly. He moved to the edge of his chair and his voice became stringent as he focused on each person's "flaws."

Tom requested that the video be replayed three times. He was astonished by the difference in his demeanor, tone of voice and comments when he talked about his staff. While he thought he had been using good management techniques, it became clear to him that he had placed himself in a superior position, treating them harshly, as if they were misbehaving children.

Once Tom became committed to change, his coaching sessions were devoted to reviewing his everyday interactions with his staff and discussing what
behaviors he should start, stop or repeat. Tom then followed through by experimenting with the appropriate alternate positive behaviors that were suggested. He became invigorated by the process, relishing the fact that using the new behaviors triggered positive responses from his staff. They were clearly more productive and more engaged in their work, frequently coming up with creative ideas and suggesting innovative ways to solve problems. Switching from an overly-aggressive leadership style to the partnership model proved to be the missing link in Tom's career path. Six months after improving his management approach, he realized his goal of assuming the presidency of the company.

To succeed in today's evolving workplace, leaders must stay attuned to their strengths and weaknesses, adapting the behavior to complement changing standards and expectations. Like Tom, those who are willing to change will be able to realize their goals and contribute to their organizations. After all, as we move into the 21st century, it will be the partners, not the autocrats, who sit behind the president's desk. ***

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