



WENTWORTH 1

Leadership, Teamwork and Self-awareness

VIEWPOINT

DEALING WITH CONFLICT

I recently got this email query, which seemed like an interesting topic for Viewpoint.

"How do you coach courage?? - I have a couple of individuals that work for me that have real difficulty facing conflict. Even though the issue may be small, they have a tough time mustering up enough courage to confront their subordinates and discuss problems. Instead, they will often times even take on more work themselves, rather than instructing someone to correct a mistake they've made. So my question to you is, how can I help them overcome this fear and become more effective supervisors? Others I've talked with seem to think that courage in this situation is hard to develop - either you have it or you don't, but I have to believe that it can be developed / improved. What are your thoughts / recommendations?? Thanks, Jason (USA)

Here's my reply:-

I believe "courage" to confront these situations can definitely be developed, though it may be harder to develop for some more than others.

It is not an uncommon phenomenon, and strangely, I have come across quite a lot of senior execs, even CEOs, who have this same problem. They may seem very confident and have a "red" character in Insights terms, but still often have the Achilles heel of a fear of challenging people, especially those close to them.

The key to dealing with the problem is in understanding it, and in being fully aware and conscious of the problem as it manifests. Often people will rationalise their behaviour away - "It's not that important", "It doesn't really matter - I can do it myself quickly enough" etc etc. but they are really only avoiding their fear.

Most people with this fear are not really conscious of how it is driving their behaviour, and this is usually because the pattern has been in place a very long time - usually since childhood. As children we have little power (the adults have it all) and unless we are heard when we speak up and challenge, we can learn that conflict causes "rejection" and start to avoid it. The behaviour can then stay with us as adults and become quite "set", in a way which is below our conscious awareness.

This doesn't mean you need a therapist(!), just that it's important to recognise that the "unconscious child" position lacks power and self-belief, whereas in current reality, the adult "conscious" position has a lot more power.

How do you get to this conscious position? Well, at Wentworth we take quite a time to help people understand their fears on our courses, so it's not easy to package it up in a paragraph or two, but putting it very simply there are four questions to ask yourself:-

- (1) What is the worst that can happen? (if I tackle the person).
- (2) What is the best that can happen?
- (3) What is most likely?
- (4) What will I actually say when I tackle it? (prepare a script).

After working through these questions, people usually end up smiling at how "irrational" their fear is. It helps if someone else asks the questions, so that rationalisations and defences don't rear their ugly head so much, and even writing the answers down can help.

We have a tool called "Improving your confidence in taking (emotional) risks", which fleshes out the simple questions above giving more depth. If you want a copy, email us.*

Andy / May 2009

* applies to anyone reading this

NEXT WENTWORTH 1 COURSE DATE:

7 - 12 June 2009