

MANAGING THE MATRIX



THE SECRET TO SURVIVING AND
THRIVING IN YOUR ORGANIZATION

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Managing the Matrix

The secret to surviving and thriving
in your organization

A MENTOR'S TALE

Dawn Metcalfe

WILEY

This edition first published 2014

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John Wiley and Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Metcalfe, Dawn,

Managing the matrix: the secret to surviving and thriving in your organization / Dawn Metcalfe.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-118-76537-1 (cloth)

1. Matrix organization. 2. Employees—Mentoring of. 3. Performance. 4. Personnel management. Title.

HD58.5.M47 2014

650.1—dc23

2013047058

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-118-76537-1 (hardback) ISBN 978-1-118-76534-0 (ebk)

ISBN 978-1-118-76535-7 (ebk)

Cover design: Simon Goggin

To my new friend Boris. You kept me going when things got hard. Thank you.

Introduction

Working in the matrix is hard. That's what anybody I've ever spoken to who works in one says. Many of them say that it is the only option, however. They recognize opportunities exist in the matrix; but almost every person and a significant amount of research point to turf wars, confusion over accountability, competing geographical and functional targets, lack of clearly defined roles, and too many people involved in the decision-making process, as some of the problems caused or exacerbated by working in a matrix.

To find out how best to deal with these issues I have talked to hundreds of managers, directors and executives during training courses and coaching sessions. I've formally interviewed dozens of individuals entrenched in organizations that use the matrix structure. The answer seems to be that the “soft” skills we often wait to train people on until after they need them are key to success in the matrix and, possibly, in any job.

This book is a story about Johann, a senior manager, recently converted believer in “soft” skills and desperate to keep Debra, a high-potential, highly educated member of “Gen Y” who feels like she's not getting enough attention. It asks whether emotional intelligence (EI) exists and, if it does, how is it useful in working within a matrix? And of course, if it exists and is useful, then can we learn it?

My story is based on what I have learned from clients, many of whom work in a matrix organization. What is striking is the similarity of their experiences across industry, job function, level in the organization, cultural background, age or sex. It appears that it's always difficult to get people from different cultural backgrounds (whether nationality or functional or organizational) to do what you want when you don't understand why they resist, especially if you can't force them and have no control over their pay or conditions.

The personalities and events in this book are not based on any individual but reflect the stories I have heard and the situations I have seen over the years. The issues are challenging because to resolve them you need what the best leaders and companies have, and what the Corporate Leadership Council identified as playing a critical role in the matrix – strong communication skills, teamwork, adaptability, and shared goal and rewards systems. Without these (and they are not easy to get) the issues most commonly faced are lack of accountability, frequent conflicts over allocation of resources, and division of authority – none of which are good for the bottom line.

Johann and Debra exhibit a mixture of all the great attributes I see in my clients – listening, questioning, open-mindedness, generosity, thoughtfulness, determination, and pragmatism. Of course they aren't perfect but then who is? Their faults and opinions are all entirely made up of course.

The matrix isn't going away: in a European survey conducted by Krauthammer, an international professional services company, published in 2006, 85 per cent of people said that some form of matrix was present in their organization. This leaves us with two choices – to devote as much time and energy to honing the “soft” skills that lead to personal and organizational success as we do to building or

technical skills or to rail against the tides like King Canute. I hope this book persuades you to do
Johann does.

The Challenge is Set

Johann Spilk was frazzled. He couldn't understand why he'd done it. Why had he just staked his reputation on something that he had only just been convinced himself would work? He sighed.

Shrugging off his jacket, he hung it up before greeting a couple of colleagues. Then he checked in with his assistant (as always, here before him and already organized for the day ahead), sat down behind his desk and took a sip of the over-priced and highly calorific coffee he'd started drinking since giving up smoking during Ramadan a few months ago. He turned on the computer screen and logged in, ready to prepare for his day of meetings.

Johann's first meeting was with Debra, a young “up and comer” currently doing a rotation in the finance department working on a company-wide project. He didn't really know much about her as they had never come into contact.

At a workshop the previous week, Debra had been identified both as “talent” and “at high risk”. In other words, she was doing her current job really well and was likely to be able to move up at least two levels in the next three years, but was known to be actively looking for a new job. The exec team wanted to keep her but she had just been turned down for a promotion as they felt she wasn't ready for the next role yet.

So far so good. But then Johann had had the bright idea of suggesting that she be given a place on the new mentoring programme he had set up.

Background: about two years ago the new HR director at the time, Amy, had flagged up a trend where the time taken to get new hires up to speed was taking longer with each intake. And, then, when they *did* get them functionally competent, the best of those people were disappearing. When HR asked them why they were leaving, the most common response was that they weren't getting the development they wanted and were going somewhere smaller. They felt like they were slipping between the cracks and not learning.

The company decided to create a training programme where money was spent on an online university. Employees could now watch multimedia presentations and earn credits for undergoing training courses. Some of these courses were made mandatory to emphasize the importance. This initiative worked well for technical training, but the behaviours that the programme was meant to address – giving feedback and helping employees develop – hadn't changed. In fact, it was found that, after training, most people reverted to their standard way of behaving within a few weeks, especially if their own managers didn't support them.

Johann had been travelling on the day that a task force had been set up to deal with this and so obviously, he had been “volunteered”. The “task force chief” (he cringed) had asked him to investigate and come up with some solutions. One of the things on the list of recommendations had been mentoring. Johann did a bit more research, engaged in training and, despite himself, had become convinced of its merits.

After 20 years of managing others in different multinational companies, in different locations, preceded by 10 years in the army where he believed he received the best training money could buy, Johann had approached the mentoring course with what he would describe as “some scepticism”. Others might regard it as hostility. Despite himself, however, he found it was helpful to have a basic model or theory to refer to when working with others, and it offered a chance to practise important behaviours.

The idea he was mainly interested in – and so the area he tended to work with most with his mentees – was emotional intelligence (EI). He didn't claim to be an expert but rather an interested layperson who believed, after doing his homework, that EI was somehow key to the success of individuals in a matrix organization. He came to realize that EI might be the only tool beyond being skilled at your job that works. He was starting to believe that you could teach EI by using it, and by being transparent about using it, during mentoring or coaching.

Setting up the programme had proved quite a battle. The CFO, Sara, had already described it as a “colossal waste of money” and on mention of his new mentee Debra, she had simply huffed, “that's a great idea” in a sarcastic tone. Johann had decided that he'd had enough of her snide comments and said so.

From there things had disintegrated into an ultimatum: he said that either he'd keep Debra and make sure that she was ready in nine months or he'd get rid of the mentoring programme which he'd spent a lot of time and energy fighting for.

Huh! He knew how much she spent on air travel last quarter alone and the mentoring programme was a bargain. Still, he had to admit that the whole premise could seem to come across as a bit “airy fairy”. Not to mention, given his behaviour in the meeting with Sara, he probably wasn't the best advert for how EI can help you succeed in a matrix. And, given that was what the whole premise of the mentoring he was providing, Johann couldn't help feeling a bit worried.

How, he wondered, had he got himself into a situation where now, despite having a to-do list as long as his arm, he had to carve yet another hour out of his day to meet with this young, disaffected high flyer? Normally Johann would have done a bit of research and been prepared with basic information and good questions, but he hadn't found the time. So, to some extent, he'd have to wing it.

Quickly skimming the notes in the performance management system he remembered what the Talent Manager in Debra's department had said: high potential and clearly not as engaged as she was last year. It was suspected that Debra was annoyed not to have been promoted but her manager had not had that conversation with her. Johann thought – so many problems could be solved if people would just

step up and have that difficult conversation.

Not that he necessarily believed everything the Talent Manager, Yulia, was it?, said. He'd learned over the years that, even with no malice or deliberate attempt to mislead, important things get lost in translation and motives are ascribed where they don't exist. And, with HR, he thought with a smirk, you can never be sure that there isn't malice!

As he dismissed this uncharitable thought, there was a tentative knock at his door. He raised his voice

“Come in!”

A head poked around the door. In her early 30s, Debra was well-dressed with a couple of quirky touches – Johann particularly noticed the enormous green ring on her right hand. Making eye contact, she enquired:

“Johann?”

Johann smiled in return and nodded asking:

“Debra? Come in! Come in!”

Johann was moving around the desk as Debra approached.

She entered the office confidently and leaned forward to shake his hand. Johann was pleased – he always found it, despite himself, difficult to warm to someone with a limp or overly strong handshake and knew he wasn't alone in this having just the other day discussed it with some of his colleagues.

“Take a seat! Will you have a coffee? A tea?”

Debra asked if she might have a cappuccino and Johann called for his assistant to take the order.

“Two of your famous cappuccinos please Roshan.”

Reflecting on how he found himself waiting for coffee to arrive with this woman who now had his reputation in her hands, Johann sighed.

He had pushed very hard to be given one day a week to devote to mentoring people from across the organization. The attendees had been chosen by a mixture of line manager nomination, HR approval and exec committee final signoff. Not that the signoff had been more than a rubber stamp. Until he made a fuss nobody had known about the programme. He'd been quietly getting on with it – seeing a lot of his mentees once a week – some just for a few minutes on occasion, and others for much longer. He should have kept it like that – off to the side. Less pressure. Ah, well. It was done now and he'd just have to make the most of it.

Anyway, he enjoyed the mentoring. It was fun to meet colleagues from across the organization, and he found that he often learned as much or more than he taught. But, even with the time he'd been given, it was difficult fitting in these sessions in addition to his "day job". Johann took it seriously and was constantly trying new approaches. He'd even joined a LinkedIn group and signed up for advanced training so that he could be a certified mentor and stay on top of any new research. Apart from anything else, and the management meeting debacle aside, he found that it made him better at his day job because he was more reflective – aware of what he was doing and the impact it was having so he could be more flexible and get better results. Not that it worked without fail. He sighed again. "I really must focus on keeping my temper or at least managing it better," Johann reminded himself.

Today was going to present more challenges than usual – he fully expected to meet some resistance to the idea of mentoring and coaching from Debra. On top of that, a couple of his regular mentees had dropped him a line outlining their objectives for the sessions or the issues that they wanted to discuss. There were some interesting conversations ahead!



Key Takeaways

1. Traditional training courses can work well in some respects, but in the end, most people simply revert to their standard way of behaving.
2. Many problems in the workplace could be solved if people felt more able to step up and have that difficult conversation.
3. Emotional intelligence may be the only tool beyond being skilled at your job that works.
4. It's possible to teach emotional intelligence by using it (and being transparent about it) during mentoring or coaching.

Laying the Cards on the Table

Roshan came back with the coffee and Johann, who had been making small talk, now turned his full attention to Debra's professional situation. Pulling his seat forward slightly, he gave his card to Debra, who looked at it carefully before handing him her own. Pleasantries over, Johann got straight to business, admitting "I'm afraid I don't know as much about you as I would like as this has happened rather quickly."

"Yes," said Debra.

Johann nodded as she stopped speaking. Although she was perfectly polite, did he detect a note of not exactly apathy but certainly a lack of enthusiasm? Maybe even hostility? He decided to probe a little further.

"So tell me a little bit about yourself and why you're here."

Debra took a deep breath. "Well, I'm 32 years old. I have an MBA. I've been promoted four times in six years and I moved to this company eight months ago when I was made an offer I couldn't refuse. She stopped. "It wasn't just the money although I won't lie the package was very attractive and, of course, it's a prestigious organization; but it was also the chance for growth and development that was shown."

Johann took a chance, "And do you feel, now, that you made the right decision?"

The hesitation was obvious as Debra's mouth opened slightly.

Johann interjected: "I'm sorry. I should have been clear up front on confidentiality. Assuming you don't tell me anything illegal or against the company's rules, everything we say in here is completely confidential and I will share nothing without your express say so. That's one of the rules of the programme and I take it very seriously."

Debra's shoulders fell and she leaned forward. "To be honest, I'm not sure. I enjoy my work and I think I do a good job. In fact I know I do a good job but I've just been turned down for a job that I know I can do and been assigned a mentor!" Listening to her voice rise and the tension creep in, Johann prompted her.

"So it doesn't sound like you're very happy with the situation?"

“Would you be?!” Debra paused before starting again in a calmer voice: “I have already done the majority of that job. ~~The only difference would really have been the size of the geography~~—I’d have been working across the whole region which really is the only next move for me if I’m going to stay here. And I don’t want to leave – it’s a great company, I like the people and the work ...”

“And you’ve only been here eight months,” Johann suggested.

“Quite,” Debra agreed dryly. “Even in today’s environment that could seem a bit flaky.” She stopped, embarrassed that she had admitted considering this to someone so senior.

Johann just nodded his head. The internal recruiter had already flagged that he had received Debra’s CV from a “recruitment consultant” who clearly wasn’t doing his job properly if he thought it was OK to send resumes to current employers! “And the mentoring programme?”

Debra looked puzzled so Johann elaborated, “you said you know you do a good job but you’ve been turned down and given a mentor.”

“Exactly. Again, I don’t understand it. I get good performance reviews. I’m always level 4 or 5 or ‘matching’ or ‘exceeding’ expectations. I’m involved in a lot of cross-functional projects and now I’m being pulled away from my work. For what? I don’t get it!”

Johann paraphrased, “So you feel like the mentoring programme is for people with performance issues and you don’t believe that this description applies to you?”

“Exactly!”

“And nobody has discussed this with you?”

Debra shrugged, “Well, one of the guys from HR told me that there was a mentoring programme for people who need help to get to the next level and I was lucky enough to have been chosen.”

Johann shook his head and smiled. “OK, let’s try something. Think about these questions. What percentage of people in this company would like a promotion? And what percentage would need some help to get there? And what percentage does the company invest in time and energy and, let’s be frank, money to the extent that they get to work with, and I say this with no false modesty, a very experienced and talented senior manager?”

Debra grinned as she noticed Johann dip his head and raise his hand as though to toast his own brilliance. “Fair point. I suppose you could look at it like that. I guess this is an investment in me.”

“Exactly! We can see you are a high performer and we believe you have the potential to rise much further in the organization. We don’t want to lose you but nor do we want to set you up to fail. In other words, the mentoring is not because we don’t believe you can do the job, it is because we want to prepare you to succeed. This is not just because we’re lovely people but because it makes economic sense.”

sense for us to do so. It costs a lot of money to hire you, and we haven't got our return out of you yet. On top of that, we want to invest in you so that you're worth more to us. What do you think?"

Debra was still smiling. "Well, when you put it like that. But come on, let's be honest. I've heard this all before. There's always another training course to go on."

"Exactly. Look, I get it, but the worst-case scenario for you is that this is a 'fad' and we're just paying lip service and you'll waste a bit of time but you can always look for another job then." He looked at Debra. "Or maybe you'll find that it's useful. What have you got to lose? Looking at your last review you said that you felt that you hadn't got enough development opportunities. This is a development opportunity if you want it."

Debra thought for a moment. She couldn't see what was in it for him – why was he giving up his time for this? I suppose he could just be bored, she thought. She imagined he was probably making a nice amount of money, had a nice wife, a nice life – their kids were doing ok at school and they could afford to travel and buy nice things. Maybe he'd been doing the same job for ages and just wanted to "give something back". She stopped her eyes from rolling, aware that Johann was looking at her.

"OK," she said brightly, "how does it work then?"

"The idea is that we meet twice a month for about 60 minutes a time. How we use the time is up to you. We can work on particular skills you want to develop and, ideally, we'd work on something that was 'real'. For example if you want to improve your 'stage presence' in presentations or write better emails or develop your ability to influence others we can work on that. Whatever you want – we just have to be clear on what we are trying to achieve and why. From there we'll work out a plan and then implement it."

"Sounds great – I'd like to have someone I can trust to talk things over with. It seems like a lot of work for you though? Do you do this with others?" Debra was interested to find out how many other people were given this "special" opportunity.

"Yes, a few. It changes over time. People come and go and sometimes I know I'm going to be particularly busy – like last year when my grand-daughter was born I started to reduce the number of people I work with. But I missed it so here we are ..."

Debra murmured "I see" as Johann pulled out a photo of a pretty little girl about 10 months old. "Beautiful," she said, smiling and, after a respectful pause, "So, tell me, when and where would we meet?"

"I like to devote a whole day every week – other mentors do it differently but I've found this to work best for me. You can have as much time as you like – first come, first served but the minimum is a 15 minute phone call and the default expectation is to meet for 60 minutes face to face. The most important thing I've found is to meet regularly and to stick to the meetings we agree. If we don't then it becomes difficult to maintain momentum."

Johann paused and smiled, “I should tell you one thing – I have a hard time with lateness as I read it as disrespectful, regardless of my best attempts to see it otherwise since I know it's not always the case. Anyway, work with my PA, Janet, to make it happen. She'll be in touch tomorrow to make sure you have all the necessary contact details. But the responsibility of making the appointment is yours.” Johann looked directly at Debra as he spoke; he wanted her to understand that this was important.

Debra nodded in agreement. She, too, struggled with people being late for meetings or work – she dreaded to think how much time the company was losing every year as a result of all these “small” delays. Maybe she could work with this guy after all.

“So we've covered why we're here (we want to keep you) and what we want to achieve (you being ready for the next step) and we've also dealt with some logistics – how often we'll meet, and how you'll set up the meetings.”

Johann took a deep breath. He still found it difficult to state what seemed to be obvious to him but he knew, from experience, how much of a difference it made to be completely transparent whenever possible.

“I'd like to be up front about what I want to get out of the mentoring work we'll do and also about my concerns. I'd like to share them very honestly and hear your thoughts. My experience tells me that that helps to make sure the work we do is successful. Then I'd like to hear the same thing from you. Is that ok?”

Debra nodded again. This was more of the “airy fairy” approach she had been expecting from a “mentor.”

“Great. So, obviously I'm a boring old man who has been everywhere and seen everything and am now wise and grey-bearded so this is a great opportunity for me to have a captive audience.”

Johann trailed off as he realized that Debra wasn't entirely sure he was joking. He grinned. Although he was a grandfather he was still a young man at 55. Wasn't he? The grin faded.

“Joke! Although you should be clear that there are, in fact, some substantial potential rewards for mentors in mentoring you – Sun Microsystems compared the career progress of about 1000 employees over a five-year period and found that mentors were six times more likely to have been promoted and both mentors and mentees were about 20 per cent more likely to get a raise compared to others not in the programme.

“And the skills I've learned as a mentor have been really useful in my current day job too. So many of us come into management and we don't get enough training, or it's at the wrong time, or we've got a boss or a rewards system that forces us to create bad habits so that we aren't the best managers we could be.”

Debra nodded, recognizing a number of the managers she'd dealt with.

“The mentoring training helped me to formally look at what I do and about how to get better. Really simple things that made a real difference.

“And, of course, there is the increased job and personal satisfaction – the rewards of seeing someone you've helped progress and succeed are probably the best thing.

“You know, I have been around the block a bit and learned some things and it's very rewarding to have a chance to share what little I do know.”

Johann felt he'd gone on too long.

“But it's not just about what I know, it's also about helping you to develop in other ways and we need to work out what those are! So what about you? What do you want to get out of the work we do together? From me? How can I help you?”

Debra leaned back in her chair and took a sip of coffee. Johann seemed nice but she had had her fingers burned before. She decided to be as up front as he was.

“What I don't get,” she sipped again, “is why the company is putting, as you said, so much time and energy into this mentoring thing?”

“Because it works!” Johann looked genuinely excited now as he leaned forward, his hands gesticulating.

“Organizations that continuously support mentoring achieve amazing results: they report increased retention rates, improved morale, increased job satisfaction and commitment, accelerated leadership development, better succession planning, reduced stress and stronger, more cohesive teams. We want some of that and we've found that, if we work at it, we can get it.”

“OK,” Debra was convinced that Johann, at least, really believed what he was saying but she still struggled. “So, really, how does this whole thing work?”

“It's almost like there must be more to it than just we meet and talk about stuff and things change as a result, right? And of course there is except, at the same time, there isn't!”

Debra looked more perplexed now than when she'd asked the question.

“Let me try again. It's like this. You have something you want to do better and the time we have together is time to get help on how to do that, then you and I go away and do the things we've agreed would help, then we meet again, see how it went, make any adjustments and, when we're happy, we move onto the next issue we'd like to tackle.”

“That sounds easy.” Debra relaxed.

“Exactly. You can use me as a safe place where you can try out new ideas and see how they fit. We can try to spot problems before they arrive and prepare for them. We can celebrate achievements and learn from setbacks and then, when you're bored with me and have wrung all you can from me, you will just up and leave!”

Debra was startled. She looked at Johann carefully. Relieved she started to laugh – clearly, Johann's sense of humour would need some getting used to.

“In the meantime, my job is to challenge you to think about what you really want, what new things you need to do to get them, new ways to think about things and to do things. We can talk about whatever you want and, if you need help in an area I don't know about I'll happily help you find someone who can sort you out. In my experience most of the issues are around people and what are called ‘soft’ skills but I'm interested to hear what you'd like to work on. Hit me!”

What do I have to lose? Debra thought. “Well OK. I suppose, off the top of my head, I'd like to work out why I didn't get the promotion and work on my issues related to that. Or the issues I'm perceived to have at least!”

“Great. And remember that these objectives can change. Once we've done something we'll re-evaluate and see what we want to work on next. OK? So let's say that in the subsequent session we're going to work out what stopped these people from giving you, so obviously qualified and clearly brilliant, the job which you could do with two hands tied behind your back!” Johann grinned at Debra. “So how are we going to do that? Where can you get information about why you didn't get the job?”

“Er, I guess I have the feedback from HR. And my own opinions of course.”

“Both great sources of information. Where else can you get information on how you might be perceived? And the impact this has on you? And people around you?”

“I did a 360 a couple of years ago but that was in a different company ...”

“It might be useful though if it's the only thing you've got. Anything else?”

“There's the performance review I had a couple of months back.”

“Perfect. Anything else? Any psychometric tools or coaching reports for example? An assessment centre maybe?”

Debra agreed that she did have a rather old report from a psychometric assessment that she was prepared to share. The rest of the session was spent in logistics and small talk as they started to get to know each other better and they agreed that Janet would be in touch the next day. Just before she left however, as she was shaking hands with Johann, he asked Debra one last question that was to give her



Key Takeaways

1. Organizations that continuously support mentoring tend to achieve increased retention rates, improved morale, job satisfaction and commitment, accelerated leadership development, reduced stress and stronger, more cohesive teams.
2. Being mentored doesn't mean “you need to do your job better,” but instead is to help prepare you to succeed.
3. Mentoring challenges you to think about what you really want and what new things you need to do to get them.
4. Mentoring has rewards for all involved.
5. Mentoring works but it takes dedication (time!) and hard work from all parties.

Preparing for Change

The next day Debra was surprised to see an email from Janet in her inbox when she checked it at 8 am. Clearly Johann didn't let the grass grow. Despite herself, Debra was pleased that someone so senior made her such a priority and decided to respond immediately asking for an hour on the next "mentoring open day". This was what Johann called his weekly day devoted to working with or for his mentees and the next one was in six days.

She wasn't at all surprised when only three minutes later Janet sent her a meeting invite, with full detailed instructions, for 11 am on Thursday, 3rd July. Janet also reminded her to send the documents she'd discussed with Johann, which she duly did, after she found them scattered through her hard drive. She really did need to get her filing sorted out but, for now, settled on just opening a nice new folder labelled "Mentoring" on her desk top. Into this she put the feedback from the 360 she did a couple of years ago. She remembered the occasion – a hideous "team-building" event where everyone gave the nicest possible feedback they could get away with and solemnly pledged to being "better" to "get disciplined" or "move to great". Of course, she hadn't opened the feedback since and could hardly remember what it had to say.

Reading it now and against her better judgement, Debra was still pleased to read that she came across as "confident" and "straight-forward" and "not afraid to go the extra mile". She frowned slightly as she read on to the less positive comments and noticed, "Debra would do well to spend as much time thinking about what other people want as she does about her own position before she starts negotiation." She also grimaced at "I don't feel like Debra is always on the same side as me."

Remembering who said this she snorted but then a phrase from the meeting with Elena in HR when she got feedback on why she didn't get the promotion popped, unbidden, into her head. Elena had been talking about the need, in the new role, to work with a lot of functional heads, at the same level, and influence them to behave in new ways. There had been a "concern," she said, that Debra didn't always "synthesize" ideas.

Debra snorted again. She had had to ask for an explanation – apparently "synthesize" means "go to each and every person who could possibly care, carefully explain the situation to them, get their feedback and go around and around ad nauseam until everyone feels 'consulted' and has been 'bought in'." Well, they're right – I've real work to do and don't have time to waste on people who can't be bothered to read their emails or check the project details, she said to herself. It had been suggested that she consider a negotiation skills course, which she had agreed to do.

Next she looked at her latest performance review. To be honest, there wasn't much in it: she hadn't been at the company for very long and, in any case, few people at work seemed to take them very

seriously. One of Debra's colleagues had mentioned, quite casually, that he'd had the same objective for the last three years so that all he had to do every year was change the date and get the form signed. Debra remember turning to him quickly to check whether he was joking and noticing that everyone else seemed to take this as normal. On reflection she supposed that it hadn't been much different at her previous firm except that everyone pretended to take it seriously.

Finally she looked at one of those psychometric tests she had done even longer ago. This test was something called LIFO[®] that the FTSE 500 company she had worked with used in a number of different ways.

She had been offered it when she was made redundant and had found it useful then but hadn't given it much thought since. She was interested to see if the insights were still true. If she remembered correctly, it purported to identify basic characteristics that need to be accentuated or muted if you wanted to achieve different results with different people. She opened the report. Scrolling past the “blurb” she came to the main page of the report explaining where she sat on four distinct styles and the different drivers and motivations that generated her behaviour. It made sense to her and she could immediately think of examples of her behaving exactly as predicted by the LIFO[®] report. Shrugging as she closed the document, Debra wondered what difference knowing these things could make before remembering that she needed to get moving if she were to be on time.

Having looked at all the documents she was sending to Johann to help them both think about how she wanted to use her mentoring sessions Debra then sat with a pen and paper (sometimes the old ways are the best!) and asked herself the question Johann had suggested just before she left their first meeting.

“If you get stuck,” he had said, “ask yourself this question: ‘can I think of a time when I didn't get what I want out of a situation, whether at work or at home, no matter whether it was my fault or not? Where I wished things had gone differently?’ If you are not some kind of super-human you will definitely be able to! Then write down the first one that comes into your head. Then the second. And keep writing. Aim for at least 15. They can be something that happened 10 years ago, or even longer or it might be something that happens on the way home today. Don't censor them or worry about them being too trivial or too personal – you don't have to share them.”

Debra started to write.

Working on Objectives

Debra found that she was looking forward to seeing Johann, her mentor (it still sounded strange to her ears), again. She felt that she had prepared well and was excited to get help on fixing the things that were stopping her from getting the job she wanted next.

Johann, too, was excited about his day. His mentoring days were the ones he most looked forward to. Although often the problems didn't have just one "right" answer and were mostly messy, "human" problems, he enjoyed helping his mentees navigate the workplace and get results. He had been pleased to see that Debra had asked for an hour and had provided him with her documents. He'd found time to look through and make some notes but, although he had a number of thoughts, he was aware of the need not to have too many pre-conceived notions and to let the mentee decide on the direction. As long as, of course, the objectives were work related and within the agreed parameters.

There was a knock on the door and Debra poked her head through, "still ok to meet?" Johann stood up and moved around the desk to greet her warmly. They sat and made small talk until Johann suggested they get to work. "I've had a chance to look at the documents. I thought they were interesting. What were your thoughts?"

As they discussed the documents Johann challenged Debra to see if she felt any of the "critical" comments could, if true, explain why she didn't get the job (the reason they were meeting today).

"I don't know, I don't think so."

"OK. So just in the context of you not getting the promotion for now, given the feedback you had from HR – if you look at the two of them together do you see anything?" Johann asked.

Debra remembered the comment she had dismissed and a positive comment about being straightforward – "maybe the hiring manager was afraid that I'd cause too much trouble?"

"OK. Was he right? Would you have done?"

Debra laughed. "I can see how he might have thought that given some things I did in the dim and distant past, but I really have learned a lot and had a detailed plan of attack – I mean I really had worked out exactly how to fix the problems of that department."

"Great. What didn't he like about the plan?"

“I never told him what it was...”

“Why not?”

Debra smiled ruefully. “He never asked?”

“Hmmm. OK. Any more? As you look over all the comments about you in these documents and, more importantly, think about them in the context of the list of situations in which you didn't get what you want, do you see any themes? Are people saying the same thing in different ways and with different examples?”

Over the next few minutes Debra looked at the comments and started to identify some themes. For example “Debra doesn't always give enough attention to the things that can't be explained in spreadsheet” and “Debra needs to ‘synthesize her ideas’” could, in some lights, be seen as the same thing. “And could be something that stops me getting what I want,” she thought.

Noticing that she had identified a number of themes Johann interrupted. “That's great. Don't worry about them being fair or even relevant to you. In fact, forget that these ‘themes’ apply to you and just imagine that a candidate – another person – showed some or all of them. Could you imagine how that might make a recruiting manager think twice?”

Debra considered. “Sure,” she said. “Of course.”

“OK. So here's the hard part. Look at the list and choose the things that you most believe apply to you.” Johann paused as Debra did this.

“Might any of these explain some reluctance to give you the role you wanted?”

“Ouch. I preferred thinking that it was all somebody else's fault I didn't get the job!” Debra laughed but Johann was guessing that a little part of that statement was true.

“Maybe, let's think about that. Sometimes it is someone else's fault. But it's very hard to change other people – look how hard it is to change ourselves! It might also be that the other guy is out to get you. And this is sometimes true but it's mostly not the case. More often it's a mixture of several different factors and the only thing we can really control is ourselves!”

Johann brought the conversation back to the objective Debra had set for the first session – to think about what she wanted to work on so that she would get the next job she went for. Asking a number of different questions rapidly to keep the session high-paced and to put Debra under some pressure he continued.

“For now, let's assume that the people making the hiring decision were paragons of all the virtues and wanted nothing more than to find the right person for the job regardless of any other factors. If the super-human beings still decided not to give it to you, what might have been their reasons? Why?”

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