



LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS: TEACHER'S PET VERSUS THORN IN YOUR SIDE

Imagine you are one of the several senior executives we have coached who has an employee who gazes at them with admiring eyes, who wants to be their best friend, shadow, A-student, constant companion, and favorite employee. Are you feeling claustrophobic yet? You should be! If you are not, you could get sucked in; you could end up spending an inordinate amount of time and energy on this employee and fall into an unhealthy dynamic of favoritism as perceived by the team. As *Harvard Business Review* recently put it so eloquently in their summary of the article, [Managing an Employee Who Wants to Impress You All the Time](#), "Is there someone on your team who sucks up to you?"

A leader's perceived favoritism can have destructive effects on an executive team, or a team at any level. In our executive coaching practice, we have seen that, if a leader is perceived to be *showing favoritism*, it is likely that this behavior will show up in their very lowest rated items on a 360-type assessment. Treating people inequitably is a driver of dissatisfaction, low morale, low productivity, and attrition. That low score on favoritism will also drag with it perceptions of the leader's *abilities as a team leader* and possibly as a *team player*.

There are other dangers inherent in having this type of employee on your team. You know that this is not the person who is going to walk in and say: "I know you have always suggested doing things this way, but changing our method will get us to where we want to go faster, cheaper, more effectively." Someone under the spell of blind worship would construe such a statement as a challenge to your authority.

Innovation won't come from people-pleasers; it is more likely to come from the thorn in your side.

Now imagine you have employees who, instead of wanting to please you all the time, constantly challenge you, speak up candidly, and let you know exactly what they think even if their opinion differs from yours. What a pain! And yet, if you engage them to understand their position, you might come to change a decision you had already made...and you might be grateful for it. The thorn in your side might "save you from yourself." You want to encourage that person! In an executive coaching context, leaders who listen equally to the whole team will be highly rated on items like: *Is open to input from others. Treats others with respect and dignity. Genuinely listens.*

You can encourage an atmosphere that rewards courage and speaking truth to power. A 2016 *Harvard Business Review* article, [Can Your Employees Really Speak Freely](#), addresses this issue. You can also:

- Bend over backwards to treat people equitably and make sure they know that this is one of your values – make sure your people decisions, ranging from promoting to passing out tasks, are transparent.
- Beware of the employee who is taking advantage of your open-door policy either before the doors open for the day or after they close. In other words, the person who is the same one standing in your doorway every morning at 7:30 while you are trying to get some quality reflection time in before things get crazy for the day? Guard your boundaries by explaining, that this time is important to you and they should feel free to drop in during your office hours (like everybody else!).
- Reward fairly. Reward the people who maintain a professional distance and are guided by their professional ethics and goals, not by their desire to be "teacher's pet."
- Assign the person seeking your favor a mentor from outside of your area.

Have you managed people who are either out to please you or who seem to be always ready to challenge you? How can you ensure you get the best out of both types of employees...for the organization and for themselves?