



LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS: “NICE” CAN BE A FOUR LETTER WORD

In many corporate cultures, “nice” can be a big problem. Being nice can lead to people not getting the feedback they deserve and need, to misunderstandings (due to lack of directness), to a culture of indecision and fogginess of direction, and/or to missed opportunities. It is time stop being so nice and start being real. We are not suggesting being disrespectful or rude; rather that leaders address direct reports, peers, and customers with respectful reality. This is about candor.

In our executive coaching practice, we often see situations where someone will say something like: “I had concerns about Joe’s conversation with the customer and I was not as direct with Joe as I could have been; I felt that being so honest would not have been nice.” Rather than communicating with niceness that is opaque, oblique, and not transformative in some way, recognize that to help people grow, truth is required.

Where is your organizational culture along the niceness continuum? Does it lean toward the brutally rude or the impossibly and unproductively polite? In the middle, there is the opportunity to be constructively candid. Here are some examples of situations you might encounter in your organization and tips for how you could deal with them.

- Mary is a high performer at XYZ Corporation. Her boss, Doug, often tries to “protect” Mary from presentations to the Board so that Mary doesn’t lose confidence. He thinks this is being nice; however, in the end, it holds Mary back from gaining the confidence she needs. A tip for what Doug could do instead – he could assess her readiness using the Situational Leadership Model¹. Using the coaching model, he could plan the meeting with Mary, set the stage for the meeting to maximize her receptivity to his message, hold the dialogue to provide coaching, and follow up with her to assess and sustain progress.
- Tiffany is Bob’s manager. Bob is relatively new to the company so Tiffany doesn’t want to send him to difficult customer meetings. A tip for how could much better serve Bob’s development interests: she could coach him and help him learn how to deal with difficult people, customers, and conversations. Clearly, he would benefit, so would Tiffany, the team and ultimately, the business.
- George, the CFO, isn’t that great at interfacing with Sales. His boss, Jeff, finds it easier to do it himself than to coach George. This is frustrating for George who is trying to develop his cross-organizational skills. A tip for what Jeff could do: he could ascertain George’s readiness level to build relationships with Sales. He could modify his coaching style with George to ensure he provides the guidance George needs to succeed in future interactions with the Sales group.

How did it go the last time you gave someone truthful feedback (and when was that)? Are you “protecting” anyone from what might be a challenge that would help him/her?

¹ Developed by Ken Blanchard and Paul Hersey.