

# Committed Speaking

## Bring the Background Conversation to the Foreground:

### Discuss the Undiscussable

Although most coaches sincerely intend to speak with candor and honesty or “talk straight,” they may become cautious in order to avoid being uncomfortable. This can sometimes lead to sending mixed messages that prevent others from receiving the input they need to correct their errors and to learn. This pattern is heightened if the other person reacts with hostility to sincere attempts to give meaningful feedback. If you alter your communication as a result of this, you become an accomplice to the individual’s, group’s, or organization’s defensive routines.

The reason we may be susceptible to doing this is that we have been conditioned to speak in ways rooted in certain social virtues—being nice, not upsetting people, minding our own business, and so on. One common organization defensive routine is to make potentially embarrassing or threatening feedback that is needed for growth and learning undiscussable. A coach has to be willing to discuss the undiscussable. Diagram 3.2 shows how coaching communication is different from social grease.

Chris Argyris’ left-hand column exercise is an excellent tool for learning to discuss the undiscussable in a way that does not create a “blow up” in the relationship. Diagram 3.3 shows an illustration of the left-hand column exercise, which shows a page divided in half lengthwise. On the right is everything you said in the conversation and everything the person you were talking to said. In the left-hand column is everything that you thought but did not say. The idea behind the exercise is to become aware of what you have in your left-hand column that, if said, could make a difference in a coaching conversation.

**Diagram 3.2** Social grease versus coaching communication

#### **Social Grease**

Give approval and praise to others. Tell others what you believe will make them feel good about themselves. Reduce their feelings of hurt by telling them how much you care, and if possible, agree with them that others acted improperly.

Defer to other people and do not confront their reasoning or actions.

Advocate your position and combine it with inquiry and self-reflection. Feeling vulnerable while encouraging inquiry is a sign of strength.

Tell other people no lies or tell others all you think and feel.

Stick to your principles, values, and beliefs.

#### **Coaching Communication**

#### **Help and Support**

Increase other people’s capacity to confront their own ideas, to create a window into their own minds, and to face their unsurfaced assumptions, biases, and fears by acting in these ways toward other people.

Attribute to other people a high capacity for self-reflection and self-examination without becoming so upset that they lose their effectiveness and their sense of self-responsibility and choice. Test this attribution.

Advocate your position in order to win. Hold your own position in the face of advocacy. Feeling vulnerable is a sign of weakness.

Encourage yourself and others to say what they know yet fear to say. Minimize what might be otherwise subject to distortion and covering up of the distortion.

Advocate your principles, values, and beliefs in a way that invites inquiry into them and encourage others to do the same.

#### **Respect for Others**

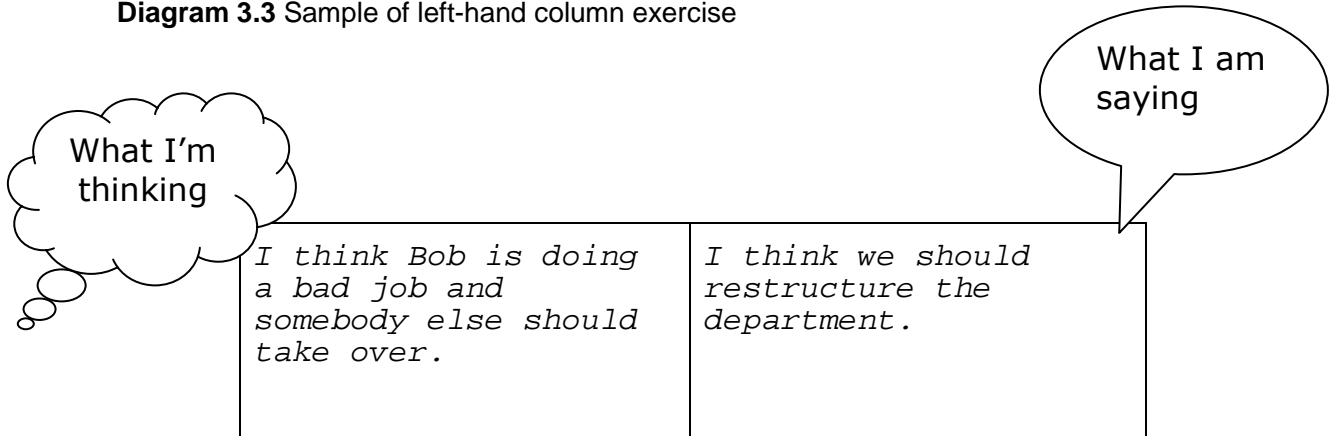
#### **Strength**

#### **Honesty**

#### **Honesty**

## Committed Speaking (continued)

**Diagram 3.3** Sample of left-hand column exercise



R. Hargrove (2003)  
*Masterful Coaching*

Adapted from Reading Lions training resources.