



Case Study: One More Step

Jim, a fairly new middle manager in a very large non-profit system, was struggling to find the best path forward through the tangle of issues he had walked into. He was an outsider to this system coming from a successful career and early retirement in another industry. A colleague suggested he might benefit from coaching. He said he wanted a coach to help him become a better leader and more effective communicator. OK, sure that sounded perfectly reasonable as far as it went, but it didn't take long to see that his situation was considerably more complex than that.

As I worked with Jim over the next few months, he discussed many of his concerns with his immediate staff, a group he had inherited, not selected. He spoke about a number of these individuals with a tinge of disapproval because it seemed to him that they needed so much positive feedback. I noticed that he often discounted the praise others gave to him, saying that he didn't really need that from other people. After a meeting in which he happened to publicly praise one of his key people, he was stunned and chagrined to hear how delighted the fellow actually was. He brought this up in a session raising the questions of why did this matter so much to others and what did it say about him as a boss that he didn't feel comfortable doing it very much?

I asked him to think back to a time when his boss had richly praised him in a public situation. He said he couldn't think of an example. I asked about previous bosses with the same answer. I tried again and he answered that as long as he was given the opportunity to participate in key decisions, he knew he was doing well and that was sufficient. I recalled that on his assessment work he had scored very low in the desire for recognition. Although we had never discussed his family, on a hunch I asked him how praise and criticism had been handled in his family of origin. As he began to respond to that question, he suddenly recalled a critical incident in his teen years that has shaped his attitude about revealing positive regard for others all these years. Added to a family environment where criticism was abundant and praise was scarce, he felt deeply uncomfortable with direct expressions of appreciation.

This was one of those "Aha" moments that coaches live for. As we began to unpack the specifics of that incident, I knew that a door had cracked open that will potentially affect all of the relational aspects of this man's life. He began to grasp how his fear of "over-praising" people had made him reluctant to be as generous and appreciative as he actually often feels towards others. After that session, I located some relevant reading materials and together we explored appropriate opportunities for him to practice giving this type of feedback. I have become more conscious of ways to model that behavior within the confines of my coaching role. Next, we'll explore some specific opportunities to try it out with his staff and talk through the results.

As coaches, we can do much to guide clients toward a richer, deeper understanding of themselves. Because self-knowledge is foundational to movement towards a desired future, seizing a "teachable moment" is a key part of the coaching process. Jim is a great client—highly motivated, very bright, and a man of deep integrity—so I'm sure he'll make great strides in this area. What a privilege it is to walk beside him for a little while, as he becomes more of who he really wants to be as a leader, a boss, a colleague, a spouse, a parent, and a member of the community.

—Sharon Buckmaster