



# COACHING THE UNCOACHABLE

“It’s not that they don’t want coaching; they just don’t want coaching from you!”

GREGG THOMPSON

Come on, be honest. Who is that one person who never really gets it, always seems to get in your way and whose personal style infuriates you? When you find yourself moaning and grouching to your closest friends, it’s usually about that person. That under-performing miscreant who creates so much grief for you that you dream of the day when you no longer need to work together. If only this person would quit or get transferred, then you could really lead. Then you could really make some cool things happen. Jim Collins would know what to do. He would kick this person off the bus so fast heads would spin. But if we were to fire the nemeses of every one of our leaders, would anyone be left in the organization?

So what is a leader to do? Regardless of what the popular “difficult conversation” books say, it is much more complex than just having a lay-it-all-out-on-the-table tête-à-tête. Unfortunately, for the leader, it starts with you....and none of it is easy.

1. **Get in their shoes.** I am not suggesting that you simply practice the fine art of empathy, but rather that you realize that you are most certainly someone else’s nemesis. This is a tough one to get your head around, but let it simmer awhile before you dismiss the idea. I know it is hard to imagine that you are causing someone else in your organization as much (or more) misery as you are experiencing, but you probably are doing just that. We readily let ourselves off the hook because we use a different standard for ourselves than we do for others. We tend to judge others by their actions and ourselves by our intentions. It is pretty easy to rationalize one’s behavior by telling oneself that you really don’t mean to be a miserable sot and that you really are a good person at heart.
2. **Look inside you.** While I am very reluctant to delve deeply into the psychological underpinnings of nemeses, I am pretty sure that what we dislike in others is likely something we dislike in ourselves. Why is it that a particular person can generate such a profoundly negative, visceral feeling in us when others are completely unaffected by the same person? Regardless of your personal viewpoint on psychological causal factors, all evidence points to something unique within us that causes us to create our own nemeses. Call it what you will... beliefs, value biases, emotional patterns or personality traits. When we really dislike someone else, I think we need to first take a hard look at our inner selves if we are in search of the true cause.
3. **Take back your power.** I have no idea who you are, but I do know that you have allowed this person to have an inordinate amount of power in your life and leadership. The moment this person became your nemesis, you gave away your power. Think about all of the time and emotional energy you have squandered on resentment, envy and animosity. For the leader, these emotions are the enemy; they have insatiable appetites and will suck up as much of your leadership energy as you choose to give them. Choose otherwise. You cannot effectively lead others when you are allowing the best parts of yourself to be wasted. I am not suggesting that you need to become a candidate for sainthood, but that you seize all of your natural leadership power by focusing on those things that allow you to be a positive influence on others.

4. **Talk to their mother.** No, I am not suggesting that you actually call up the nice lady to seek her wise counsel on how you can best deal with her errant offspring. Here is what I do suggest: Spend some concerted time and energy thinking about what this person would look like through the eyes of their mother. We talk a lot these days about seeing the best in others, but our personal viewpoint is inherently clouded by all the clutter of our own emotions, biases and values. At some point in this person's life, a mother looked down and saw the most wonderful thing on the planet, full of beauty and potential. How does this view change your perspective of this person?
5. **Seize a great role.** In your leadership story, this person is the enemy. But this person has a personal story as well. They are living out their life and job in the best way they believe they can, and you are an actor in their story. They very well may see you as an organizational adversary, as a career threat, an incompetent boob or as a reincarnation of their mean old aunt or uncle. You cannot avoid being an actor in their story, but you can choose your role. Who are you in their story now? Be honest. Are you their caring coach or their constant critic? Are you their forgiving friend or perpetual antagonist? Are you their hero or, heaven forbid, their nemesis? The great thing about being in this story is that you are free to choose your role. Choose a role of service. Choose a role that helps your nemesis become the star.
6. **Be strong enough to bend.** We want our leaders tough, strong and competitive. We want them getting up every morning ready to kill something. We want them to win. We will follow a winner. This pervasive notion about leaders is burned into our psyches at an early age. We despise losers and we love to win. But would it really be a fatal blow to your leadership career if you let your nemesis win? Is it really a matter of principle and values? How much face saving is involved? Do you care enough about your team and organization to take the hit? Here is the test (it is not easy, and is probably the most difficult thing you will have done in a long time.) Go to your nemesis. Tell him or her that you have been consumed by a lot of negative stuff (like attitudes and feelings) about him or her. Ask for forgiveness. Repeat as necessary. (Now that will take some real leadership toughness.) Oh ya, you are now ready for that difficult conversation. Who knows, you may no longer need to have one!



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