

## “The Real Problem”

by Markku Kauppinen

I got my first real management job at the age of 24. I felt very important – after all, I was the youngest manager at the bank that had hired me. I had recently graduated with my MBA and had completed my new employer’s management training program. The latter consisted of being shipped around from one department to the next and being shown what the rest of organization did day-to-day. It was all fascinating, but not very helpful. To be honest, the data back-up section was pretty boring.

I even had a chance to do a two-week stint at the bank’s brand new grocery store branch. I know you have seen them everywhere. Not exciting, I know. But back then, it was revolutionary stuff and the bank was very proud of how many banking services could be offered from a location that was not much bigger than a phone booth and fit so nicely between the pharmacy and the fresh fruit section. I had been chosen to experience it first hand. I took this as a great honor.

The highlight of the two weeks was a day when I got to do a few PA announcements for the busy grocery shoppers about our amazingly low rates on home equity loans. The shoppers were not very impressed. I only closed three loans - bathroom remodel, a new pool and a trip to see Mickey Mouse. However, I did get some nice comments from the grocery cashiers. They liked my accent. I was clearly ready for management.

I soon discovered that my PA experience did not help all that much in managing people. My degree did not seem to help that much either. It was a great disappointment. I had all the answers for the operational and financial issues. My education and limited experience came very handy there. It was the “people stuff” that turned out to be the most challenging. Motivating employees, assigning projects and tasks, mediating lunch schedule disagreements, hiring and firing people, dealing with people not getting along with one another – all of this turned out to be amazingly difficult. My professors must have all inadvertently forgotten to cover these topics. The authors of the course text books must have

made the same mistake. This “people stuff” had not come up in the university – I would have remembered!

I was frustrated. The “people stuff” was taking up almost a third of my time. What was worse, I felt I was not very effective with it. Meanwhile, I had aggressive goals to meet. More loans, more loans, more fees.

My employees seemed to fall into three main categories. The first, and luckily the clear majority, was great. These employees got the job done, day in and day out. I had this vision of how I wanted them to do their jobs. And they got it and executed. It was beautiful.

The second group, typically about 15% of my employees, was more challenging. Back then, in my expert opinion, they were simply not interested in “reaching their full potential”. They did not get me very well. As a result, their performance was only adequate. This group was like a bar of soap. I could not get a good handle on them. What was wrong with these people?

The last group was the toughest. Actually and thankfully, it was not really a group. Depending on the point in time, it was one to three employees. These employees just did not get my vision at all. I basically got blank stares from them. And sub-par performance. I learned what any creative manager learns to do. Try to get them to ask for a transfer to another location. My line: “Are you aware that there is another branch closer to your home? Your commute must be a real pain now.” This worked quite well. Problem temporarily solved.

Then one day I realized the real problem. It was both terrible and so obvious. The problem was, for the most part, me! How could this be? I had a great education and had visited every department of the bank; I had even seen the mainframes!

But there was no escaping it. It was me. The problem was actually pretty simple. I was

repeating the same behaviors. Consistently, everyday and with everyone. I was just lucky that those behaviors worked so well with most of my employees. They worked because the majority of my employees were a lot like me. They “got me” because they were like me. We saw the world through the same filters.

My 15% group was not that different from me. But clearly enough that they must have been thinking on my worst days: “Do you really get paid for this?” Fair enough.

The last group must have not been so kind to me behind my back. Looking back now, had I been one of them, I would have asked for a transfer. “Location is not important and I am willing to travel.”

In my defense, I was not alone among the management ranks. In fact, with a very few exceptions, I was like everyone else. Not only at my level, but up and down the organization. Everyone was repeating their behaviors. None of us knew how to appropriately modify them with our different styles of employees. The same applied to prospects and customers. We repeated the same things with mixed results.

Thankfully, I have learned a lot since those days. I have a lot to learn still. But I think about what happened to me as a young manager almost every day. The reason is that I get asked about these types of things almost all of the time. “How can I help my managers lead their people better?” What should we do to get our salespeople to hold their salespeople accountable?”

These are the kind of questions that you may be asked by the employees of your organization too. Do you have the answers and the information to help them?

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## “If They Don’t Care, Don’t Waste Your Time”

by Marshall Goldsmith

My mother was a first-grade schoolteacher back in Kentucky. In her mind, I was always in the first grade, my father was a first grader, and all of our relatives were in the first grade. Mom was always correcting Dad's grammar. Whenever he made a grammatical error, she would give him that stern first-grade-teacher look and bark, "Bill! Bill!" For some reason, we decided to buy a talking bird. Within a couple of months, the bird was chirping, "Bill! Bill!" Now poor old Dad was even being corrected by the bird!

One day when Dad was 80 years old, Mom began her thousandth grammar lesson. He looked up at her, smiled, and sighed in his crackling voice, "Honey, I'm 80 years old. Let it go!"

Does my mom sound familiar to you? Have you ever tried to change the behavior of someone who had absolutely no interest in changing? How much luck did you have in this religious-conversion activity? My guess is none. How much time did you waste? My guess is lots.

I have asked these questions of hundreds of people. Sometimes the context is the office, and sometimes the context is the home. But their answers are almost always the same: "I have spent a lot of time and produced no results. In fact, I am only succeeding in frustrating myself and annoying the people I want to change!"

These efforts can be particularly nettlesome at work. As an executive coach, I have a unique business model for my work: I don't get paid if my clients don't get better. "Better" is not determined by me, nor is it decided by the person I coach. The preselected stakeholders who work with the person I coach ultimately judge if he or she has improved.

I will never forget the first time I didn't get paid for my coaching activities. What was my biggest problem in this case? My ego. The Wall Street Journal had just ranked me as one of the world's leading executive educators. This went straight to my head, you might say. I started believing I was so great that I could save people. I had the

delusional fantasy that other people would get better solely because of my presence.

My client really didn't care. He had a problem treating people with respect. He didn't care about the people he managed, and he certainly didn't care about me and my newly won reputation. When I asked him why his coworkers felt he did not respect them, he grunted, "Because they are all fools!" This comment should have been a hint. I should have said good-bye. But no. I believed I was one of the world's leading consultants, remember? Unfortunately, I was being one of the world's dumbest consultants.

When working with this uncaring client, I began to feel that I was aimlessly pounding my head against a brick wall. After 18 months of complete failure, I cut my losses and admitted defeat. I learned three hard lessons:

1. I can't make people change if they have no interest in changing.
2. "Big ego" and "money-back guarantee" don't mix.
3. For a brief spell, I had turned into my mother.

For you, I have an equally hard lesson: You can't change people, either.

As a coach, I have finally learned to work only with dedicated leaders who are committed to personal improvement -- great people who want to become even more effective. I work with people who care. I help executives change only what they have chosen to change, because that's all I can do.

If you are a manager, you need to qualify the people whom you are coaching in the same way I qualify the clients I coach. Your time is very limited. You are probably too busy now. Invest your valuable time only where you will get a return. The time that you are wasting in attempting to coach people who don't care is time that is stolen from helping the people who do.

I know that sounds harsh, but you really don't have a choice. What can you do with a person who doesn't care? Knowing when to let go, as I ultimately did with my uncaring client, is perhaps the hardest aspect of coaching. But once it's clear that your message isn't going to get across, you have but one option.

As a Buddhist, one of my goals is to help you have a happier life. Do you have any objection to this goal? If you are still trying to change people who don't care -- either at work or at home -- let it go. If you never learn anything else from me, please remember this. You'll not only have a more productive life, you'll be happier, too.

***Dr. Marshall Goldsmith** recently been named by the American Management Association as one of 50 great thinkers and business leaders who have impacted the field of management. His 18 books include the Business Week best-seller, The Leader of the Future and Global Leadership: The Next Generation. Marshall is a world authority in helping successful leaders achieve positive change in behavior: for themselves, their people and their teams.*

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