Attacking Problems Not People

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Any form and any level of leadership is going to require a leader to make decisions and judgment calls. Any form and any level of decision or judgment call are going to have resistance at some point.

That resistance may come in the form of conflict, unspoken tensions, hurt feelings, frustrated team members, or any other infinite possibilities.

It may not happen today, it may not happen tomorrow, but problems will happen.

As a leader, when a problem comes onto the radar, you're forced to make another decision. **Am I going to attack the person or the problem?**

In theory, the answer is easy. *Attack problems, not people.*

In reality, it's rarely that easy.

When you roll out a new initiative for your team that you've been investing in for months and someone on the team starts whispering frustrations to other people, causing division in your team, *our instinct is to attack the person*.

When you invest countless amounts of emotional and physical energy debating a decision, and the organization doesn't see the bigger picture, *it's easy to blame the people*.

When a customer goes above your head and complains about your leadership to your boss and your boss doesn't take the time to hear your side of the story, *our initial response is never to attack the problem itself*.

Attacking people is easy, attacking people seems justified, but attacking people can be catastrophic. Why? **Let's take a look at three core differences between attacking people and attacking problems.**

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ATTACKING PEOPLE:

What is it?

Attacking people happens when we place the burden or source of an issue on the shoulders of an individual or group. They carry the guilt, and our instinct is to villanize them, neutralize the threat, and prove our worth.

Examples

- The person who gossiped about you.

- The customer who went over your head.

- The team member who drives you insane.

DYNAMIC:

Win/Lose. When we attack people, we create a binary result. There can be only one winner. Attacking people means the villain has to be a person, *and the villain has to lose.*

EXPENSE

Relationships. Because we've made this person the villain, we jeopardize any future relationship we have with them. That may seem a worthy cost at the moment, but we have to realize that it may be an extremely high cost for an extremely momentary problem.

ONGOING REPERCUSSION

Tension. When the dust settles, what happens? Someone loses. When the expense of attacking people is almost always relationships, the repercussion is going to be tension. Tension in the office. Tension in the relationship. Tension in the team dynamics. Your victory may win the battle, but it paves the way for mistrust and toxicity moving forward.

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ATTACKING PROBLEMS

What is it?

Attacking problems happen when we refuse to place the blame for a problem or situation on a person, and instead recognize that it may be a system, decision, or relationship issue. We reframe our frustrations and point them at some*thing* instead of some*one*.

Examples

- The stories that are being shared behind your back.

- The trust your overseer is or isn't extending.

- Your patience with people whose personalities differ from your own.

DYNAMIC

Arms linked. When we attack problems instead, we can go to the person we would normally blame and say, "I am having this issue. I have been struggling with blaming you for it, but I know that's not the issue. My problem is _____, and I need your help to move past it/fix it/resolve it." When we do this, we're able to move together with people on our team, make the issue the villain, and move from a win/lose dynamic to an arms linked dynamic.

EXPENSE

Energy. This…is…hard. It requires humility, vulnerability, patience, time, and willingness to cooperate. Those are extremely taxing elements. It is way easier to put on your battle armor and assume the other person is the problem than it is to sit down across from someone and give them grace in the situation to move past it.

ONGOING REPERCUSSIONS

Trust. When you link arms with someone you were previously vilifying, you're forced to empathize. Seeing things from their perspective, spending energy together towards the same goal, and making yourself vulnerable in the situation is going to build trust every single time.

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> It takes work, it takes intentionality, it takes vulnerability, and it is rarely easy. But when it comes to building trust and keeping a healthy team, leaders have to attack problems not people.

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