

Employee Leadership

Overcoming Conflict

**Executive Coaching
White Paper**

Employee Leadership: Overcoming Conflict Through Coaching

This case summarizes executive coaching work with Bonnie (name changed), a VP who was hired into a small, niche finance company because of her technical experience and accomplishments. Bonnie had two direct reports at the start-up lending company she left for this position. She now supervises a team of 60 of mostly Gen X and Boomers with 5 direct reports. Most employees have been with the organization for 5 or more years with the average being close to 12 years. Bonnie is 35 years old and therefore a Gen X (1965-1979).

Bonnie is having a challenge that is not unique to companies of any size. At first it looked like she is cause, but with minor reflection we could see the challenge ran deeper. The company she just joined had a leadership team that used to be all Boomers (1946-1964), but for the last 5 years began being hired Gen X in leadership positions and even had a few Millennials (1980-2000), apply for the VP job that Bonnie earned. All of the rest of their staff are from all generations.

The Main Problem The Client Was Facing

Bonnie quickly began experiencing pushback from 2 of her 5 direct reports; both were men and older than she is. She learned that one of them felt they should have been promoted into the VP job.

Pushback took the form of agreed-upon deadlines being missed regularly and one or both of them openly questioning of her decisions / vision in team meetings. In addition, they did not – or were slow to align their team's goals.

To be clear, Bonnie is/was fine with her plans being questioned and discussed during her senior team meetings but expects when agreement has been reached that every member of the team would move forward together.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Age in 2016</u>
Boomer	52-70
Gen X	37-51
Millennial	16-36

* Some studies report ranges differently.

Bonnie had taken action on her own. She spoke with each of her two challenging team members with no lasting results.

One of Bonnie's most challenging managers had a demanding and short-tempered approach. It was clear their behaviour was affecting his whole team and was also beginning to impact the other leaders and their departments.

Bonnie wanted to find a collaborative solution vs. an operationally driven – possibly punitive solution. She felt that pushing her seniority would do more harm than good and may even promote challenges with the other 3 direct reports that currently didn't exist.

Bonnie asked for Executive Coaching for herself and for her 5 direct reports and received the support of the company.

The Goals

Bonnie's goal was to improve overall relationships, trust and employee satisfaction within the organization. The traditional problem-solution approach was not working and the company owners were ready to try something different.

Bonnie recognized she had some areas to develop and also wanted to support her team on their growth path. She also felt Executive Coaching would (in the long-run), bring the quickest resolution to challenges. She was also the first to identify the problems were not strictly a result of her, but were highlighted because of the recent senior management changes.

Some of Bonnie's goals were to understand the impact of her actions and, doing some self-reflection to understand why she may have taken those actions.

Bonnie believed that when she shared the plan to have each of her managers to also participate in executive coaching that she would have to expect fear, vulnerability and confusion. But Bonnie wanted them to hear from her that coaching would be confidential and shared by all – and that their main goal was one of personal / professional development (understand the reason for and impact of their goals / actions), and certainly not punishment.

My Coaching Approach: Our Solution

My approach always begins with a belief that the client only ever wants the best for themselves and everyone around them. They may be struggling with someone else's behavior or with something that has triggered undesirable behavior in them.

As expected, some managers were skeptical about why they had to meet with a coach. Some felt it was punitive while others were vulnerable as they saw counseling as demonstrating weakness. Others were closed to sharing emotion – especially in a work environment. To some degree and to the best of their own abilities, all did make steady pace forward.

In our first few one-on-one meetings I focused on building trust and helping them feel respected and safe. It was also a time for both of us to gather information about each other and for me to explain my principles of coaching... which are:

- Executive coaching is 100% confidential
- Our relationship must be built on trust, respect and honesty
- I consider coaching an equal partnership where we both agree to be open and to listen to each other
- Expectations are always clearly defined and we agree to them... and we revisit them frequently
- I am not judge or jury... I am my clients support team... or part of their support team
- I am committed to balanced open feedback
- I consider every situation from a personal, business, multigenerational, and multicultural point of view.

Within my one-on-one work with Bonnie and her managers, our work began with each person beginning to reflect upon his or her actions (positive and negative), and explore how those actions may have been received. For example:

- Avoidance
- Support
- Confrontation
- Passive-Aggressiveness

It wasn't about applauding or defending actions – or even directing “blame.” It was a time to accept responsibility for their actions and resulting outcome – good and bad.

Conclusion

Bonnie and I explored her own insecurities and in the end, she felt stronger by being able to face and acknowledge those fears. One of hers was to admit there were tasks she did not excel at. She discovered that by admitting they are weaknesses they no longer became secrets or vulnerabilities... instead they became opportunities for her to look for those strengths within her team, to value her team... and for her team to feel respected and needed.

This became one of the common healing opportunities for almost everyone. In addition, the generational differences became less of a challenge and began to be seen as an asset – even by the most conservative of Bonnie's team.

Each manager became more compassionate to others vulnerabilities as soon as they began to name theirs. The team stopped pointing out each others weaknesses (directly or indirectly), but instead recognized them as opportunities to become supporters. Each manager also began using what they learned with their team – not passing judgment on weaknesses but either looking for training opportunities to close a gap or to be work more collaboratively.

Emotional and social intelligence grew, as did their awareness of their actions, respect, engagement and appreciation. This change was noticed and acknowledged throughout the organization. As the positive benefits were identified, so was their motivation and momentum to continue. What began as a reluctant exercise for many became an exercise of pride.

There was noticeable change throughout and following the coaching, which included:

- Telling was often moved to listening
- Blame, judgment and defensiveness became awareness, flexibility and a willingness to engage in a conversation
- Ego and control turned to collaboration and a sense of team
- Fear became feelings of trust

Summary

Through coaching, Bonnie's team reduced stresses and became more supportive and more productive.

I will not say there were not some bumps along the way, however, by staying present, true to my principles of coaching we got through with great success. We were able to do was to help everyone step out of his or her comfort zone – or fear-zone, push boundaries and increase employee engagement, improve motivation, and enhance team productivity.