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Turn Unproductive and Damaging Conversations into Productive Ones

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Okay, picture this - Someone in your company (it could even be you) sticks their head in someone's office (it could even be yours) and makes what seems to be a simple statement or request that blows up in their face.

Her: "Can you be at the meeting on Tuesday?"

Him: "You know I can't."

Her: "Well, if I knew you couldn't, I don't think I would have asked."

Him: "I can't."

Her: "Why not?"

Him: "Can we talk about it later?"

Her: "A lot's riding on this meeting."

Him: "I know - we talked about it last week."

Her: "Well, I can't talk about it later. I need to make a decision. If you can't go, you can't go."

Him: "Okay. Whatever."

Sounds like a couple of people at odds over a meeting. In reality, it's a couple of productive people engaged in an unproductive conversation. And the reason has little to do with the meeting.

What you've just experienced are two people engaged in a reactive cycle. A reactive cycle is when people react in a conversation instead of participate in one. And if left unchecked, a reactive cycle can do more than kill productivity - it can damage relationships.

For starters, let's examine the background of this conversation. "Her" is really Gail. Gail is head of account services.

The "Him" in this case is Walt. Walt works for Gail and is her lead sales person.

Now imagine that Gail and Walt had held a conversation in the hall a week earlier in which Walt had asked Gail not to schedule any meetings with clients on the Tuesday in question because he had scheduled an out-patient procedure on that day. Gail didn't have her trusted day planner with her to write it down - and has forgotten. Unfortunately, it's not the first time Gail has forgotten something Walt has explained to her.

Now, if you read their conversation again, you'll have a better understanding of what's really going on.

Although Walt's behavior may seem justified, it doesn't matter who's right and who's wrong in this scenario. An important meeting has been scheduled and an important person won't be there.

Gail thinks Walt is uncooperative. Walt thinks Gail is out to get him.

Like all reactive cycles, emotions escalate and nothing is accomplished.

In order to understand reactive cycles, let's look at how your mind acts when you're engaged in one.

It starts when someone says something you don't like. At that moment, you assess them. In a split second, you decide that they're insensitive, uncaring, unselfish, dishonest or irresponsible - or all of the above.

Your emotions kick in. Your fears are triggered. You feel threatened. Out of control. Defensive. You react by attempting to control the situation - or manipulate the situation - or you just simply retaliate.

When you react in this manner, you inevitably say something the other person doesn't like. And that causes them to assess you as insensitive, uncaring, selfish, dishonest or irresponsible - or all of the above. Their fears kick in. And then they, yep, you guessed it - they react to you by attempting to control the situation - or manipu-

late the situation - or just retaliate, which only justifies your initial assessment and makes you react again.

At this point, who really cares about a crummy meeting anyway?

If you care about having productive, healthy conversations, you can learn how to avoid reactive cycles.

There are three steps involved.

We refer to them as "name," "claim," and "reframe." The first step is for one of the parties - or both of them - to notice that they're engaged in a reactive cycle. They "name" it.

The second step is for one of the parties - or both of them - to realize that it's their cycle. It's not one else's. They "claim," it.

The third step is for both parties to try and understand where their statements are coming from. They, "reframe" their perspective. This exposes any hidden agendas and gives people insight into the emotions behind the words. It gives each of them the chance to communicate the unmet expectation that triggered the negative assessment of the other in the first place. By doing this, each person owns their assessment and their feelings. Instead of laying blame, each person shows compassion for the other person's situation or point-of-view.

Once they've "reframed" their perspective, they can have an open, honest, healthy and productive discussion on how to accomplish their mutual objectives.

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