

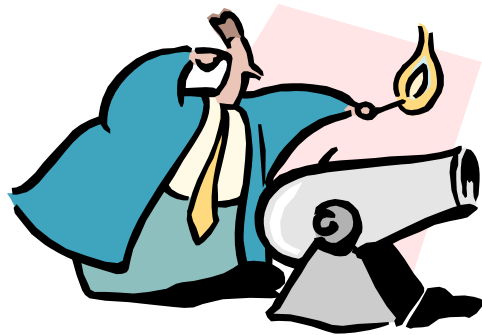
Welcome to the nineteenth edition of Jennifer Selby Long's *Traveling Light*. Are you blessed with the talent and opportunity to lead? *Traveling Light* will skyrocket your impact and lighten the load inherent in your life. It's based on the work of executive coach and management consultant Jennifer Selby Long. Copyright 2008 Jennifer Selby Long. All rights reserved.

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Feedback as a Competitive Sport

Incoming volley! Duck! It's the feedback war and it's underway.

A common roadblock to success is the use of feedback to win, to dominate the person (sometimes a direct report, more often a peer) seen as the opponent.



Why should you care? Well, your happiness and sanity, for starters. There's also the broader impact. Organizations in which leaders and managers routinely share high-quality feedback are easier to scale and have fewer nagging problems and less operational drag. They also have less undesirable attrition. I have yet to see an exception to this.

What does competitive feedback sound like? Here are four examples:

1. "My organization will not be held accountable for commitments made in my absence."
2. "This is a dictatorship, not a team."
3. "You intentionally didn't invite me to the meeting with the CMO. You have to invite me. Our project scope document dictates it."
4. "I want us to be fair here."

As feedback, this is pretty much as bad as it gets, and will cause more problems that it will solve. Fundamentally, this feedback is designed to hurt the recipient, to cause a wound that festers until it kills the recipients or weakens them so much that they cease to be a threat. Let's look more closely at what's going on here:

The first two statements are passive-aggressive, alluding to a problem the recipient is assumed to have created.

This first is stated as a demand, and the second is directly insulting to the recipient's character. The third mixes character attack with a direct order for the full effect.

The fourth is passive-aggressive, implying that the recipient does not want to be fair, or is not being fair, while the feedback provider is the only one being fair.

None of the statements includes, or even implies, an invitation to work together to define, explore, and resolve the issue.

If you are on the receiving end of competitive feedback, try this approach to shift the conversation into a collaborative and productive mode:

1. Take a deep breath. The oxygen will fortify you against the attack and help to keep you calm.
2. Without raising your voice, say the attacker's name. Repeat until he or she looks at you. Attackers often fire a volley and then hide behind a side conversation or laptop.
3. In the case of a passive-aggressive statement, paraphrase the statement more clearly, checking for understanding: "It sounds like you believe I have made commitments for you without checking, and that you are upset with me about this. Do I understand you correctly?" Continue asking for clarification until you understand the issue.
4. In the case of a character attack, keep your cool and remember that if you didn't have the upper hand (at least in the attacker's mind), he or she wouldn't be trying to bring you down.
 - a. First, try paraphrasing and checking for understanding: "Wow. A dictatorship. That hurts. I don't want anyone on our team to feel that they are being forced to do the wrong thing. Is that what you mean by a dictatorship?" Listen to the response and ensure that you really understand the attacker. Remember that you have the upper hand, and you will keep it only by staying calm and avoiding a shooting match.
 - b. Second, ask the attacker if he or she would be willing to explore this further one-on-one.
5. Most importantly, really listen to the responses and engage in a dialogue aimed at pinpointing the real issues and addressing them. Most of the time, these techniques are enough to end the competitive attack and redirect the conversation.



This process will redirect 90% of attacks. If they continue, however, you'll have to escalate to a different methodology, which I'll cover in a later eZine if there's enough interest.

There are a million reasons you may not want to do this, and if the attack only happens once, you probably won't need to.

However, if you want to *travel light* (and I assume you do, since you're reading this eZine), you can save time and strengthen relationships by having these conversations.

Ignoring the competitive feedback or trying to match it or top it will give you a win in the moment. This is true. However, in my experience, I have found that attackers just keep firing volleys until the person in power (that's you) listens to them. It's a short-term win but a long-term loss.

Sometimes, although not often, the attackers even have good points to make. They're just such poor communicators, and so wrapped up in their fears, that they actually fail to make their points without your help.

What if – gulp -- you've recognized yourself in this article...and you're the attacker? First of all, congratulate yourself for recognizing this. Most attackers never do, and it holds them back from reaching their true leadership potential.

Recognize too that *everyone* has been an attacker at some point. It's often an unconscious behavior. By becoming more aware of healthier forms of feedback and dialogue, and using them, you can become a more powerful and self-assured leader.

The Quick Guide to Spotting an Extravert at Work

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