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Getting Lodged in the Furniture

by *Tricia Jack, CPPA*

Isn't it true that as leaders we can either be part of the problem or part of the solution? Years ago (being young and foolish, you understand), I worked with a colleague who quite frankly drove me crazy. Her twittering, whispering and complete obsession with detail caused me no end of grief. She drove me so nuts that I would avoid her as much as possible. I found myself treating her differently from the others on my team; in a sense ostracizing her. While I did nothing to show this behavior (or so I thought), she saw right through it, and one day even had the nerve to call me on it. I suppose I am not able to hide my feelings as well as I thought!



There are thousands of management and interpersonal skills books and training courses out there suggesting to us how we should "be" as leaders, but none of them work if we are not sincere. When we feel some kind of negative emotion towards a person, such as anger or distrust, they often sense it a lot quicker than we realize. We are transparent; people can eventually feel our negativity even if our outward behavior doesn't demonstrate it. The authors of the book *Leadership and Self Deception* describe this negative state towards others as being "in the box."

Being in the box is to treat people as less than ourselves, to treat them as objects, to be blind to our own problems and to those of others. In fact, being in the box means we might even be *creating* the problems, because when we are in the box, we betray our basic instincts of wanting to help someone, making us capable of deceiving ourselves. This causes us to justify our behavior, inflate others' faults and at the same time, inflate ourselves.

Because most of us are in the box most of the time, most of us are defensive most of the time. That defensiveness sets up a pattern of blaming others, even when it might be us causing the problem. Picture an infant learning to crawl, pushing herself backwards. Because she can't see where she is going, she soon gets lodged beneath the furniture. She realizes she is stuck. What does she do? She does the only thing that seems rational to her: she cries, thrashes around and finally pushes even harder against the furniture, all of which only makes her predicament even worse. If she could talk, she'd probably blame the furniture for being in the way, because even though she is doing everything she can think of, she is not solving the problem.^[1] As leaders, we can either be part of the problem or part of the solution.

When people are defensive and start blaming each other, they both feel justified and need to stay feeling justified, even when this is not solving the problem. At some point, we can justify our own behavior by believing that the other person is a jerk, an idiot or some other derogatory term. By then, we *need* the other person to be that jerk so that we can be justified in blaming him or her!

It's easy to get out of the box. You simply start thinking that you want to be out of the box and regret your behavior while you were in the box. This might mean humbling yourself to an apology. Yes, that means admitting you were wrong! Often when you express genuine regret it can not only take you out of the box but the other person too, and when you are both out of the box, the problems can be solved.

Are you in or out?

^[1] The Arbinger Institute. 2000. *Leadership and Self Deception: Getting Out of the Box*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., San Francisco.