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Business Matters: Wanting to be in control when we should be taking charge

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One of the common topics of discussion in many of my coaching sessions is clients that struggle with the need to be in “control” and who have difficulties when they feel someone else is “controlling” them.

When conducting 360-degree Leadership Assessments on clients, it is also not uncommon to see that many rank high in positional leadership (this means that people follow them due to their position or title) but not as high in the category of permission leadership (people follow them voluntarily).

As I unpack the feedback, this typically comes back to the same premise, as these individuals are often viewed as controlling and will tell you that they “have to” be in control of situations; what everyone is doing; and when they are not in control, that they are not at ease.

I find myself then posing the question, if we find ourselves fighting for control, then who is ‘taking charge’? This question is often left with the response of “I don’t know” or “what’s the difference”?

When I sit with the question of being in control vs. being in charge, I find there is a major difference between the two. One of the traits we often associate with good leadership is the ability to take ‘charge’ of a situation, specifically during a crisis or dilemma. Part of that includes assessing the situation; fact finding; assimilating for ourselves and our team the key data or facts to determine exactly what is going on from the various perspectives; formulating a strategy for meeting the needs of the key stakeholders while ensuring the mission critical results remain the primary focus; and providing guidance and leadership to reach the best outcome for all.

People who take charge are often motivated by the desire to create the best outcome and ensuring all parties are treated equitably and feel validated and valued.

When we think about what it means to be in “control”, we should first think about what it means to control something or someone. Control is typically about having the “power” to do something. When we really focus on that word, things like “power struggle” come to mind and we can also recall situations

where power is taken.

If we are trying to control of anything more than ourselves or our personal behavior, this can also be very touchy. Another potential concern about power or control can be, what is the motivation? Often, people who take control, are motivated by getting or having things done 'their' way. This can feel like the "my way or the highway" style of _____. They might assess the situation to see how best they can take advantage of any weaknesses in the opposition or those they have positional authority over or in their argument.

It can also feel as if they do not care about others and that their main objective is to get to 'their' goal the quickest. They may not _____ and leadership, but, rather, bark orders at people and scare others into obeying their demands. Some people who control can be motivated by having power over others, and victory. They may see issues or disagreements concluding with someone winning and/or losing.

Leadership is not about Power. Leadership is Influence – nothing more, nothing less. How we can have influence with people is not by trying to be in control but by getting buy-in, building collaborations, gaining trust, leading by example and empowering others – to name a few of the _____ or laws.

Will there be occasions during these situations where someone will need to 'take charge' or step up? Of course! For many teams, this will build that trust because, as the leaders, you will have demonstrated that you are dependable, can handle a crisis, and are reliable.

Having said that, you will have gained that credibility with your team and will be able to influence decisions in a constructive, _____, and positive way vs. using your position, authority or power to control how people behave, what they say, and whether or not they do the work you assign them on a day-to-day basis.

I realize some of us are okay having people show up daily and perform out of compliance, but wouldn't cooperation be a better indicator of our true level of influence or leadership? So, the next time you find yourself thinking about the desire to control others or situations, ask yourself, is it really control you are seeking?

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