

-tone Deaf!!!

Hate is a strong word, but recent surveys note that as many as 85 percent of people strongly dislike their jobs! Perhaps one of the most hated aspects of any job is being spoken to in a disrespectful tone. A few years back, 2000 CEOs were surveyed and asked to name their top five issues for the new millennium. Respect was in the top five.

In our corporate "warrior culture," overall, we tolerate a disrespectful tone in the workplace, but it leaves people feeling unappreciated, stepped on and resentful. Being Black doubly compounds the problem. It leaves one wondering if the disrespect is a symptom of the work culture, of discrimination, or some combination of both.

I suspect nothing.

Why should I? It's early, a quarter past 8:00 a.m. on Monday. A faithful few park themselves in front of green computer screens on gray, state-issued desks. Work has begun.

In my efforts to awaken from the morning's haze, I gulp down steaming herb tea, far too hot for the human tongue to handle. My colleagues imbibe steaming cups of java in their own efforts to shake off semi-

consciousness.

University environments subscribe to notions of collegiality. This one's no different; it is built on the premise of free expression, in ideas and speech. Anything less violates the explicit as well as implicit norms of collegiality.

As a black man, I subscribe to these noble notions yet I feel their application may not always apply to me. I expect my colleagues, to make off-color remarks, well meaning or otherwise, no matter what the work environment advertises. Experience has proved this in the past and history has a not so surprising way of repeating itself.

Long ago I learned to put away my tit-for-tat scorecard. The emotional investment such daily tally-taking makes is too exhausting. You're faced with living on a perpetual see-saw; was some comment or request shaded with the tone of disrespect? Was it willful or accidental? It's tough to figure

Occam's Razor

Definition: Given a choice between two explanations, choose the simplest — the explanation that requires the fewest assumptions.

Tone Deaf: continued on page 2

Instant Success? Temper Your Coaching Expectations With Time

Clients today seek quick results from their investment in coaching. Who can blame them! Our world is fast-paced and clients expect to experience tangible gains at the speed of today's reality.

In the short run, this may sound doable. The client gets their immediate needs met. But, in the long run, the expectation of receiving both quick and long-lasting results may be a disservice to client's overall best interests.

For a client to experience growth in their personal development takes time. To maximize the benefits of coaching, the client must temper their expectations of results with time.

Here are seven common myths driving coaching client expectations around time:

1. My Coach will tell me what to do.

• **Example:** Frieda, a small business

owner, maintains an extremely busy schedule crisscrossing the country in order to keep up with her vibrant business. On occasion, Frieda makes requests of her coach for advice on work-related personnel issues.

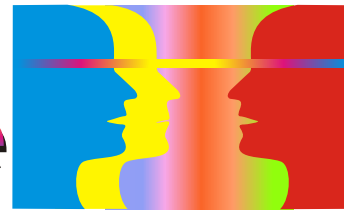
• **Reality:** Powerful coaches never tell a client what to do. Unlike the world of consulting, the coach isn't armed with a cache of solutions tailored to solve a client's problems. Our culture bases professional success on the range of solutions a practitioner comes up with to solve problems. Consequently, many clients look to the coach to provide them with solutions directly. In fact, powerful coaching enables clients with the capacity and competence to access their own inner resources to create solutions. In time, a coaching client becomes skillful in sourcing the gifts at their disposal and they can act on their perceived issues independently.

2. All my issues go away.

• **Example:** With a burgeoning business practice and demanding family life, Brian, a massage therapist, lives life at a frenetic pace. He has little, if any, quality time for himself or his family. Brian often finds himself irritable, testy, and hypercritical of his wife and particularly the kids. His way of being has created a disconnection between himself and his teenage daughter. He has experienced periodic highs in their relationship followed by precipitous lows. Brian wonders if his edge will ever dull.

• **Reality:** Brian continues to experience an elevated level of frustration. The only way out is to tame his reaction. His situation has to be treated with care - kindness, gentleness and compassion. For Brian, the first step is in deepening his capacity to be with a yet undistinguished pattern. As

Instant Success?: continued on page 2



tone deaf!!!

Continued from page 1

out and it sure makes life hard at work. To work alongside colleagues with your guard raised all the time, just tires you out. Still, every so often, a questionable encounter can stir an uncharacteristic reaction out of me. Today's the day.

In the distance, I detect the faint, yet distinctive click-clack of a woman's heels against the hard, shiny floors. Untypical of the more deliberate gait of scorching summers in the south, these footsteps imply a sense of urgency. The brisk sound of their hurried pace echoed throughout the hallways.

It couldn't be my boss. She's off at Harvard on sabbatical. Who then is it? Just as I look up, Patsy pokes her face through my doorway.

On loan from the flagship campus, Patsy dresses like the few proud women elected to Congress a light gray suit, skirt below the knee, and black pumps. Her appearance conveys one message: I'm dressed for business, I look like business, and I mean business! No chance of your unraveling a loose thread from her spiffy yet conservative duds. And no one would dare mistake her of slipping into a casual Friday's lull.

As colleagues, we own identical titles, Policy Analysts. On the organizational chart, we occupy the same rung. Our work is critical in informing higher ups on shaping statewide educational policies in higher education.

Patsy had final approval of any draft document before its distribution to the public. Still, neither of us possesses any real material power or authority. For either of us to exercise such, real or imagined, could be perceived as a threat.

So here I sit at my desk, contemplating this week's to do's. No hello, no have you got a minute, and no good morning splits her lips.

Patsy snaps at me, like a pit bull growling at the end of a short leash. "What's the meaning of this?" She snarled, and tossed a draft letter on my desk. Days earlier, I drafted a letter to a concerned citizen on behalf of the now late Senator Claude Pepper.

Still sleep deprived, I respond back, "The meaning of what?" My curiosity now piqued on several levels. What's gotten into her this morning? Until this moment, we've never exchanged one cross word. But then, we've never worked together either.

"Is that how you use a salutation from a U.S. Senator?" Until now, I've never written one, so I'm open to correction. "That's why it's a draft," I say. "The salutation is wrong, dead wrong," she said, "and so are you!" With these words, with this tone, an invisible line of mutual

Continued on page 3: Tone Deaf

Instant Success?

Continued from page 1

he builds his awareness to recognize changes in his body, rather than be enslaved by his reactions, Brian can lay a foundation to know and be with his habitual patterns of being. His triggered reactions can then be anchored, but he needs time to increase his own awareness and ownership in both physical and emotional ways.

3. Can I expect results overnight?

- **Example:** Claudia, an aspiring city manager asked if she would experience total transformation in her professional life within two months.

- **Reality:** Of course you can, but I wouldn't count on it! The design of our lives is accustomed to speed - instant pudding, instant grits, instant relationships and so much more instantly. Get it for me now; the faster it's done, the better I like it. We want what we want when we want it and we want it now! The assumption is, once I get "it" - whatever it is - everything will be just fine. But, it won't. It's a façade. The rise in life satisfaction is temporary. And then, it is back on the gerbil wheel, chasing yet another life goal. There's always the next hurdle in life to jump over, the next experience to log, and next goal to achieve. Do you catch an echo of yourself when you hear the words, "Once I have this one thing licked, everything will be just right!" Building the capacity to interrupt and examine the patterns that the cultural mandates of "instant gratification" enforce takes time.

4. My Coach will cheer me on.

- **Example:** One student client said that she wanted a coach to cheer her on, motivate her, and hold her accountable for her actions.

- **Reality:** Go to a basketball game. Just kidding!

Our culture tends to see "motivation" as an external factor, an inducement to behavior that is kindled outside of the individual. In fact, the spark of inspiration that motivates us generally comes from within. A powerful coach lays a foundation by using language, distinctions, observations and practices to foster greater self-awareness for the client. The coach also creates a powerful design to address that client's issues. There is a direct relationship between the time a client invests in their personal development and their progress. Cheering then becomes a natural by-product of that growth.

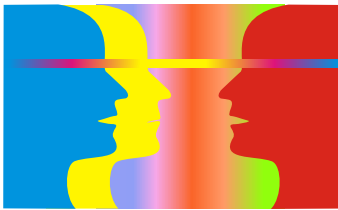
5. I'll never be afraid again.

- **Example:** One business client expressed fear about changing jobs; leaving a well-established position in high-tech for a risky transition into health care. Underlying his immediate concerns was the angst of fear. This fear not only lived in the here and now for him, but it was also leaking into a future yet to come.

- **Reality:** A few years ago, our culture popularized the slogan, "No Fear." Even today, people still show off T-shirts emblazoned with this slogan. It's symbolic: a public

Continued on page 3: Instant Success?

Face-2-Face



Digest



Planning the future of your organization ... now!

Instant Success?

Continued from page 2

declaration of fearlessness. In a warrior culture, fear is unacceptable and is taken for weakness. Yet, fear is a natural and often helpful part of the human experience.

There's no escaping it and to say we're "without fear" numbs us to its presence and fosters a false view. Aggression is as much a fear-based reaction to various people, places and things as is avoidance, or acquiescence to authority. At no time in life will anyone be completely free of fear. It is a necessary component to our survival and coaching won't do away with it either. However, powerful coaching can build greater capacity to acknowledge and be with fear. The right type of coaching offers the client a renewed perspective on fear by carving new pathways to see it, consider its impact, and respond to it.

6. My life will be perfect.

• **Example:** Dr. Ray heads up an anesthesiology department in a Midwest hospital. He's enrolled in the coaching program to improve his interpersonal transactions between himself, his colleagues and his administrators. Upon the conclusion

of this coaching, he expects life to be, as he describes it, perfect.

• **Reality:** Perhaps! A typical refrain is, "I'm working on it." "It" is never right now, it's always someplace down the road, in the near or perhaps distant future. Rarely are we ever satisfied or complete in our present circumstances. Something is always wrong, not quite there, or you might say missing. So, we're always in hot pursuit of it, this thing called perfection. Even when it is found, it is rare for anybody to define it. Its trappings and accumulations - wealth, fame, possessions, appearance and more, define the notion of perfection. Working through a worldly façade of obsessions and addictions takes ... time.

7. I'm all done now, right?

• **Example:** Ellen, a successful consultant, completed a one-year coaching program. We distinguished a number of blindspots for her. Ellen experienced material growth in her personal as well as professional life. Near the program's conclusion, she posed the question, "Is this all there is?" "What's next for me?"

• **Reality:** Of course not! The work needed for her ongoing personal development requires a life-long investment. Our culture often tells us that once we've complete a course we're finished with our work. But personal growth and development is a life-long

project. A daily practice becomes a measuring stick of our personal growth and development.

To guide her personal development along a lifetime journey, we designed a year-long plan of key milestones. We explored some possible next steps and options available to her and we identified other resources to sustain the progress she had made thus far.

Before signing up for coaching, be mindful that lasting results require time. Powerful coaching doesn't provide quick fix, instant solutions. What it can do is leave the client able to self-generate and self-correct along a life path of personal growth.

Coaching should leave clients with a capacity to access their own personal resources for the future. And, as with most worthwhile efforts, lasting results won't be realized overnight, but only in due time.

- Strategic Planning • Business Coaching
- Meeting Facilitation • Team Building
- Change Management
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Face-2-Face Digest

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tone deaf!!!

Continued from page 2

respect was crossed.

Aloud I ask her, "So you mean to tell me that the only element missing from this draft is an improper salutation? Is this right, I ask?" "It is," she barked back, "Yes! You should know better!"

Inside my chest, a primitive rage rocketed from beneath the level of my conscious thought and raced to the surface; like hot ash spewing from a volcanic eruption. I lose it. Several decibels

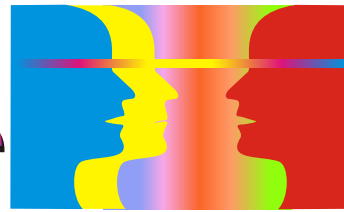
higher than a thunderclap, I roar back, "Get the hell out of my office! And don't bring your donkey ass back here until you can speak to me with respect!"

From the volume of the decibels, from the strength of the directive, and from my dirty look, her glacier-hard tone melted in a flash. With the precision of a spit-and-polish Marine Corps honor guard, Patsy whirled around 180

degrees, marched out of my office, and streaked up the hall. In the corridor, the quick, distinctive sound of her high heels resonated even louder than before.

Though she's gone, my heartbeat and breathing remain elevated as my anger simmers to a low boil. Despite its rightful place in the rainbow constellation of emotion, I hate resorting to anger as a means of self-expression, yet that

Continued on page 4



TONE DEAF!!!

Continued from page 3

reaction got her attention.

I sink back into a surreal reality of reflection. "Man, you're in trouble now," I thought, "You've blown this woman off. In the best case, you'll be labeled an angry black man. In the worst, you'll lose your job!" I sigh to myself thinking, "Man, how did I let myself get drawn into this mess over some lousy punctuation?"

Disgusted with the exchange, I think to myself, "I don't care. Who does she think she is anyway! Nobody talks to me like that, especially not in that tone."

Something about her tone implied a familiarity, as if she felt she had permission to speak to me in that way, but the source of that familiarity was unclear. Was she doing this because that's who she is -- or was she doing this because of who I am black, and she has an unconscious or conscious thing going on about "talking-down?" Or, is it something even more complex than I can begin to figure out?

We had had no previous work related conversations. Her tone left a putrid taste on my palate and it had awakened a warrior's reaction out of me, submerging my usually compliant demeanor and leaving rationality far behind. Still, that anger might have been the right reaction; the first one generally is. But now, would the weight of "angry, black and male" be tattooed on my forehead?

While I was suffocating in these reflections, I never noticed anybody in the outer offices until two of my female co-workers rushed into my office. They were overwhelmed with joy and laughter. Their glee seemed reminiscent of fans dancing in the street after the scrappy hometown ball club steals a victory away from the media darlings in the World Series.

"I've never seen you so, angry, so upset! I like it". "Yeah!" "You put her in her place". "I like it". "Yeah!" "She deserved it". "I'm glad you did it". I like it". "Yeah!" "That b ----!" Like some skit from a Hoops and Yo-Yo cartoon, they mimicked each other for ten minutes. Through me, they lived this experience.

While welcome, their validation did little to quiet my angst. For them, it was the best of both worlds. They were reacting vicariously. No egg is on their faces. There are no consequences for them to wrestle, and no fears for them to reckon with.

But for me, a black man, I am always suspect. I share my fear of retaliation with them and they vow to back my account as witnesses within earshot of the exchange. It may not help, but time would tell.

In the midst of this heated exchange, I'm challenged to hide my emotions and still puzzling on what had provoked this. Was that tone taken because she's an English professor and knows better or because she's chief grammarian, and feels a sense of permission to cross the

invisible line of respect when her area of expertise is threatened? Was this lapse permissible because it was early, and she too wasn't quite awake? Like a night sky filled with stars, the possibilities for her actions seem endless. And all of them seem believable, but again, the simplest answer seems the most obvious one. Taking that tone with me, sets off my "It's a black thing," alarm every time. She's taking this tone for that reason. No other explanation seemed plausible.

Later that day, I bump into the chief. It was important for me to clean up my mess. I preferred for him to hear my version rather than any second hand account.

His response surprised me. "Good for you!" he said, seeming to think little of it. I was left with the impression that he was more preoccupied with other pressing matters rather than his role as referee in a sparing match between two bantam-weight staffers.

For a minute, my fears dropped away, but they were quickly replaced with concerns for the future.

What happens when I come up against this kind of situation again? What if it's some other person, like a boss who takes a certain "tone" (entitlement, superiority) with me and I interpret it as a black thing rather than a work thing? Will I be capable of managing my self? How my own tone might show up in the future left me with no sense of relief.

30-day Self-Observation Questions

(Adapted from New Ventures Practice Questions)

Is there something in your life, work and/or relationships that you would like to stop? Where have you made a valiant attempt to stop something with little or no success?

1. What did you want to stop (thinking, feeling, doing, saying)? What was that?
2. What and whom did you want others to stop (doing, saying, showing)?
3. Did you ask these people to stop? If yes, did they? If you didn't ask them, why not?
4. What are you learning about yourself (life, relationships)?

If you find these self-observation questions of interest and would like to explore them further, I invite you to take a personality style inventory at my website: www.dwhconsulting.com/survey.html.

E-mail the results to me and indicate your wishes to schedule a complimentary 30-minute consultation on the results of this test and/or your own perceptions, as defined through the questions and self observations here.