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SUGARCOATING CAUSES CAVITIES

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Quick Summary: Telling people what they like to hear instead of the truth can create damaging misconceptions.

Abstract:

To avoid hurting other people’s feelings, we often turn a blind eye and do not bring to their attention situations that are detrimental to them. In most cases, the issues are minor and will have no lasting negative impact. However, a pattern of many small issues or a few larger issues that go uncorrected can have a long-term impact. Helping others understand your perception of a situation and, in turn, being willing to accept input from others helps us grow.

Many years ago, as a recent electrical engineering graduate, I was hired by a company that annually hired dozens of engineers. During my second week on the job, I was “invited” to participate in a mandatory class on effective presentations for ten weeks. The class met weekly for two hours, and no excuses were acceptable to miss the class. Like my other classmates, I had never been exposed to courses on public speaking and certainly had no interest in it. Each week, including the first week, each of us had to stand up in front of the group and give a presentation. Each week, the form and format of the presentations were different. The students shared two common traits: We disliked being forced to “waste time” in class and hated the instructor. During the course, we were all convinced that the instructor had been drummed out of the Marine Corps for being too nasty of a drill instructor. Later, we discovered he was a senior engineer and had gone through the same course years before. Our hatred for the instructor was based on his relentless demand that each of us provide a highly critical comment for each of the other student speakers after they made their presentations. Making a positive comment was unacceptable to him. As his interrogation went sequentially from student observer to observer, it became more difficult to identify some unique negative aspects about the presenter. When the last student was called upon to make their critical observation, most of the comments became trivial. At first, we all took the negative comments from our recently met engineering colleagues quite personally. Like many of my fellow students, I would leave each session with a throbbing headache and sweating profusely. Several months after the end of the course, which I barely survived, I began to realize the value of that course and the instructor’s approach. First, I learned several valuable public speaking techniques that were applicable to venues. The venues varied from one-on-one meetings with my boss to large presentations in auditoriums. The second lesson that I learned was far more valuable. It involved being able to give criticism to others in a non-threatening way with the goal of helping them achieve better results. In reverse, I learned to accept criticism from others, initially assuming that their comments and intentions were intended to help me. Essentially, I learned to lower my defensive shields

and listen. Of course, as human beings, I understood that others may have different, less constructive motives, but unless one is willing to initially listen, it is very difficult to objectively determine the motives and validity of the criticism.

Unlike the classroom environment discussed above, most of us have difficulty directly providing negative feedback to others. Instead, we offer positive feedback or say nothing to avoid hurting someone's feelings or creating an awkward situation. We do it every day: Telling someone how good a meal was when we could barely choke it down, complimenting someone on a new hairdo or dress, raving about a friend's new car, or complimenting on a colleague's work product that we know has errors or will need to be redone. Although some of these small "white lies" are harmless, others give the recipient a false sense of security and reinforce their behaviors that may, in fact, be quite destructive, thereby creating a cavity or gap between their perceptions and reality.

The articles in this collection in the Reviews Section discuss the need for honest and open dialogue during the employee-management review process. However, honest feedback needs to occur between all employees, independent of any hierarchical reporting structure or peer relationships on a continuous basis. Critical feedback needs to be tempered, unlike my effective presentations instructor, whose techniques were noble but problematic. It could be easy to fall into the trap of following the often-stated notion that you are seldom disappointed if you look for the worst. Some individuals may use the constructive criticism mantra to justify their negative attitudes toward individuals or the entire organization. Those individuals can create the type of cavity that needs to be directly addressed to promote the organization's ongoing health.

Offer genuine help, be open to receiving it, and minimize the amount of sugarcoating you use or consume.