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Professional Leadership Results, Inc.

Helping you align your people with your vision



A Little Less Kerfuffle?

After only seven days in London, I was happy to have successfully navigated The Tube, I could recognize the difference between the boroughs of South Kensington and Chelsea, and I had even begun to decipher the many mysteries of the Queen's English. I was hanging out in London's swankiest neighborhoods feeling like an American guest star in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, and I realized (realised?) that I hadn't spent time with any other Americans for nearly a week!

While sightseeing on a Beefeater's tour of The Tower of London, I was surprised to find my fellow American tourists' accents sounded strange, nasal, and funny. We stood together, shivering outside Bloody Tower, where our man dressed in official British garb told the gruesome history of the castle and site of famous beheadings. He looked out across the lot of us—mostly from the U.S., some Australian, some French, and a few from Great Britain, and asked us what we thought the castle might have been missing after its initial construction in 1066? "A nice, big bathroom?" a blonde from Michigan piped in. Our guide had a sense of comic timing as his face took on a mixture of false horror and disdain. (Use your best British accent here...) "A bathroom?" he barked as he shook his head. "We gave you a perfectly good language and see

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what you've done!" And his voice trailed off. I'd been there just a week—and knew by now to ask for the toilet or the loo. And we laughed, of course, since the real answer was a moat—the castle was missing a moat until 1285.

CROSSING CULTURES IN COMMUNICATION

I was thinking about this, along with the British use of *brilliant*, *knackered*, *snogging*, and my new favorite: *kerfuffle**, as I prepared to present my debut workshop for a highly regarded London company. My workshop, *Influencing Skills*, provides hands-on practice for initiating difficult conversations and confrontations. It emphasizes influencing up and across—with one's superiors or peers. All of a sudden, I became hyper-conscious of my American spelling on my posters and class materials—organization for *organisation*, behavior for *behaviour*. And even worse, I began to fret about whether my humor, my jokes, my typical shtick would translate into appropriate cross-cultural communication.

HUMAN COMMONALITIES ARE THE FOCUS

I soon found that our basic challenges in communication often cross most cultural barriers. My language became a non-issue and our human commonalities became the focus. My participant's stories of bosses who appear too busy to make small decisions or those who spend all their

time micromanaging sounded very similar to the stories I'd heard while working with American groups. One manager knew she was ultimately responsible for addressing performance problems of her employees, but she worried criticism of one in particular might crush this person's spirit, or worse, the employee might cry in the midst of this difficult conversation. Another participant was concerned her boss would become angry or defensive if she asked for more autonomy on an upcoming project. These are similar issues we face in any organization when the stakes are high and the quality of our working relationships have a significant impact on both our day-to-day lives and the long-term success of our work.

CORE ISSUES IN CONFRONTATION

What's at the core of these difficult conversations? What is it about human nature itself that causes us to shy away from confrontation, or worse, do a poor job of it and botch things royally?

It seems even the word *confrontation* carries negative connotation and heft both here in the states and across the Atlantic—it conjures up images of angry, emotional, in-your-face sorts of interactions. Most of us have lots of examples of confrontation gone-wrong, playing the part of either perpetrator or victim, and we can conjure up these memories in an instant. However, if we define confrontation as simply *the act of respectfully coming together with someone else to make a request for a behavior or behavior change*, the whole event seems much less intimidating. We might be filled with much less dread if we anticipated a face-to-face with the hope of clearly communicating what it is we want another to do. It is fear, then, or the possibility of pain, that causes us near and far, to avoid confrontation at all costs.

SUCCESSFUL CONFRONTATION

What might a successful confrontation look like? Consider the following:

1. MEET SOMEONE IN PRIVATE, FACE-TO-FACE. If someone were to make an important request of you, wouldn't you prefer this? Take the time to carefully plan how, when and where you will communicate.

2. PAY ATTENTION TO NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION. Over 90% of what someone interprets has nothing to do with the words we use. Your tone, facial expressions, and body language will communicate your sincerity and level of seriousness to the other person.

3. BE SPECIFIC. BE SPECIFIC. BE SPECIFIC. Don't make them guess or have to fill in the blanks you've left out. Tell them exactly what you want and why it's important to you.

4. ANSWER THE UNSPOKEN WIIFM. Even if the person doesn't ask, they subconsciously want to know 'what's in it for me?' What would be the positive result of their saying 'yes' to your request?

5. BE QUIET. Listen carefully and hear how they are responding to you. What are their questions or objections? Are they saying 'yes' or 'no'? Confrontation is just the beginning of creating a more open, honest communication relationship because when effective, it can help each person understand the specific goals of the relationship and the outcomes desired by both. Besides, if we became better at confrontation, there just might be a little less kerfuffle in our lives! ❖

* adjective to describe anything fabulous; completely exhausted; cuddling and kissing; commotion or ruckus.

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