**The What Vs. How of Career Success & Performance Management:
A Quick Primer on Courageous Conversations**

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When I say "performance management," I'm imagining that in your head you now have visions of evaluations, rating scales, online systems (or, heaven forbid, Word documents or paper), etc. Trust me when I say not only is that NOT what this blog is about, those things also have virtually nil to do with good performance management.

Real performance management is a culture-infused way of being between leaders and employees. It cultivates — nay requires — leaders to have open, constructive, honest dialogue with team members about their performance, on a ongoing, consistent basis, seeking to help employees understand "this is how you're perceived, this is where you stand, this is what's working, this is where you're struggling, and this is where we see you headed" – for good or ill. Fundamentally, if you review employee survey results across industries, organizations, staff levels, etc., that's what your employees are clamoring for: tell me where I stand and help me get to where I want to go.

Far too frequently, our systems drive performance management instead of performance management driving use of our systems. After doing HR and Employee Relations for umpteen years, I frankly stopped worrying so much about performance management systems because they weren't driving the right behaviors. I began to tell leaders, "I don't care when, how, where it happens, as long as it's happening and you document it."

And the biggest issue performance management often misses is the "what" versus "how" question. It's so much easier to talk about and measure "what" is getting done: "You're missing your numbers, you're knocking the metrics out of the park, etc." It's tangible and concrete. Successful careers aren't build on the concrete.

Careers get derailed when leaders don't talk frankly about the "how" things get done. People don't work in a vacuum – even if they work in a vacuum factory! We must collaborate, we must partner, we must be accountable to ourselves and others. And that's why the "how" is so important.

You might now be wondering, "How do I talk about the how, especially with a difficult or toxic employee?" Carefully, clearly, and consciously, that's how! And ideally start the dialogue when you first begin to get feedback about or notice directly difficulties in how your team member is engaging with internal and external partners and stakeholders. Most often, leaders shy away from these conversations, hoping the employee will just "get it." Or they find ways to pass their problems along to others. Don't be that leader!

Successful employees who are delivering the what time and time again, above and beyond the call of duty, are often relying on ways of being (how's) that are likely being overused. Strengths taken too far become a liability, and we see this all too frequently. They're out of balance, focusing on the results at the expense of people and process.

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As we get more senior in organizations with broader influence and direct leadership, the more critical the how becomes, and people find themselves getting promoted and then getting off track. To get someone back on track, it starts with one thing: You have to talk to them. (Gasp! Shock! Yes, I know…we have to talk to our people.)

Many leaders are reticent (ok, afraid) to have these courageous conversations because they don't know where to start. How you start these is critical to success. So how do you open? Here are some examples. The first is an early stage guidance conversation opener:

- Suneela, there is no doubt in my mind or anyone else's here that you deliver results for the organization time and again; you are a valuable employee with what I hope will be a long track record of success here and in general as your career unfolds, so thank you for all you have done. And, I'm beginning to be concerned about some things I'm noticing that I'd like to bring to your attention now before they become overly problematic. I hope you'll take what I'm about to share in the vein in which it's being offered, which is to be helpful and to guide you to even greater success. May I share what I've noticed?

The key components of this opening are threefold:
- Start by reinforcing the value of the employee and their contributions
- Use "and" not "but" in moving from what's going well to sharing that there are concerns; this allows both statements to be true and equally valid
- Ask if you can share, which gives the employee to power to say yes or no or to postpone to another, better time.

And how do you open the conversation with someone you should have talked with long before now, who is leaving bodies in their wake as they get their job done (and you're at your wits end). These are what I refer to as the "call to growth" conversations:

- Jason, what we're about to talk about may be difficult to hear, and I take responsibility for not having had this conversation long before now. I owed it to you and I put it off far too long, and I'm sorry. You have a track record of getting things done for this organization and delivering results. The what you've done, in others words, is tremendous. There are serious concerns, however, with the how you go about doing it. I want to give you the opportunity to hear the feedback and make real changes quickly and sustain them over time. If things don't change, I'm concerned about your ability to remain with (or be successful in) the organization and that would be a shame. May I share with you our concerns?

And of course there's always the situation where you inherited a problem that no one has dealt with before. It sucks, and there's nothing you can do about that, except decide to have the courageous conversation. It's a variation on the one above, and it sounds something like:

- Samantha, as you know, I'm relatively new to the organization. What we're about to talk about may be difficult to hear, and I apologize if no one has taken the time to have this conversation with you before now. My assessment is that you have a track record of getting things done for this organization and delivering results. The what you've done, in others words, is of real value. I have serious concerns, however, with the how you go about doing it. I want to give you the opportunity to hear the feedback and make real changes quickly and sustain them over time. If things don't change, I'm concerned about your ability to remain with the organization and that would be a shame. May I share with you my concerns?

Employees, and people in general, respond better when given a choice. Although it may not feel like a choice in the moment, the receiver really can choose a few different responses, and you should think about how to handle those in advance. Giving people the choice to engage, delay or say "no" reinforces that they have some power in the situation.

There are also those times when something with a formerly amazing employee shifts. That's the perfect time for the "What's going on?" conversation. It opens like this:

- Rajesh, you have long been an outstanding performer who I could always rely on both to get the job done and in a collaborative and productive way. Recently that Rajesh hasn't been showing up here, and I'm concerned. What's going on?

Then be quiet, for however long it takes, and listen. You don't know what you don't know, and the only way to know it is to ask and listen.
So take a few minutes and scan your organization and your team. Make a list of the "What/How" conversations that need to be had and the key messages for each. Prioritize them in terms of stage and urgency, such as:

- A) An opportunity for refinement (low-level impact and/or recent awareness/occurrences)
- B) A real issue (mid-level impact, ongoing issues/occurrences)
- C) A serious problem (high-level impact, must be addressed now or derailment is imminent, long-term ways of being haven't been addressed)

When learning to do this, I suggest — as a great facilitator I much admire, Hile Rutledge, once said — Strike while the iron is COLD. Meaning begin with the early stage, refinement conversations so you can practice in less intense situations and gain some confidence before you dive into the harder, more intense late stage dialogues. Or ask a friend or spouse to practice with you!

Framework for getting an employee back on track: What do they need to start, stop and continue doing to be successful?
Need a good framework for the guts of the conversation? Use the tried and true SSC model:

- What do you need to Start doing to be successful?
- What do you need to Stop doing to be successful?
- What do you need to Continue doing to be successful?

Maybe you can practice with yourself? Do a scan of your own how's: Which how's are working? Which are a problem? Which need refinement? Which relationships are important and broken? And lead by example by how you handle your how's.

(A brief note about the term "courageous conversations": *courage, by definition, fundamentally requires that your heart be present.* In other words, you have to care. Be a caring leader and care enough to really talk with your people.)