



When you feel snowed over, it's probably because of a Snow Job

(Robert E. Schrull, Philip Belove, Ed.D)

If you were behind a one-way mirror watching Palmer in his meeting with his manager, Mr. Llynn, you'd see evil magic! It was astounding even to Palmer. He walks into the meeting as a solid, extremely smart and talented division director with years of business experience and a certain level of mastery and walked out 45 minutes later feeling confused, a bit stupid, and a bit like he did on a bad day 24 years ago when was just getting his feet wet. "I don't know what happens when I meet with Llynn. I feel less intelligent. I can't follow him. I can't respond articulately. What he says sometimes seems quite intelligent, but I don't have a settled feeling about it. Weird. Frustrating. Confusing."

Palmer has just been snowed by one of the masters. Their goal, in this case with Palmer, is to manipulate. Llynn is a Power Master. Such men (and women) are everywhere in the most senior positions of corporations. Their mastery of power techniques often gets them there.

Power is good. It is one of the necessary components of leadership. However, power for its own sake is not good because it weakens others. It turns every transaction into a zero sum game: whatever is won by one side must be lost by the others. In good leadership, what ever is won, is won by both sides.

Palmer has two challenges. First, to take care of himself and be sure he isn't undone by Llynn. Second, to somehow turn the win/lose transaction into a win/ win transaction.

Here is how he does it.

First he puts his experience into perspective. He's not a beginner. He's not stupid. Palmer's inability to understand what Llynn is saying, it is not a problem. It is an accurate perception and valuable information. His confusion is a powerful intuitive reading of Llynn's position. Palmer is a seasoned executive. If something Llynn is saying is not making sense to him, maybe there's something incoherent in Llynn's message or there may be no sense in it. The coaching to Palmer is simple: Trust your gut reaction.

When people talk it is going to go one of three ways:

1. **Coherent** - All pieces fit together and add up. The story makes sense. It may be right. It may be wrong, but at least it makes sense.
2. **Chaotic** - The pieces don't fit. It's a mash-up. The story looks like it's going one direction in one minute and then a different direction in another minute. The person telling the story (or presenting the plan) jumps from one story line to another for no apparent reason.
3. **Cohesive** - The presenter has jammed the pieces together and forced them to fit together, even if they don't fit together.

If somebody is doing a snow job on you, then they are not going to be coherent, they are going to be one of the other two as they seek to manipulate you. They will do this either by just plain wearing you down or throwing chaos at you so you don't know what to think. Then, when they have you totally confused, they throw one clear simple idea at you. It doesn't seem to matter if it is good or bad, it's just clear. So you go for it for relief.

Providing Development Solutions

Sometimes, in the beginning, when people are still trying to work out their thinking you will hear things that are chaotic. Sometimes chaotic thinking is a necessary part of the creative process. What's important is to recognize that the person hasn't yet figured out what they really want to do.

With Cohesive thinking, you are hearing a person trying to force a conclusion when the parts don't fit or they haven't really thought the thing through.

However, if someone is presenting material to you that is chaotic or merely cohesive and they want you to buy it anyway, then you are being manipulated. You are being maneuvered by a power player.

A power player isn't interested in the best result. A power player only wants to win. If you are an otherwise experienced exec and you feel like a loser, that's a pretty good sign you've been the victim of a power player. A power player wins by making the other person lose.

What do you do?

First, recognize the fact of it all. Ask yourself. Is this coherent? If not, then you are dealing with something ill formed, in which case you have to bring coherence to it. The way you do that is by one of three ways.

1. Trust the fact you are confused: Remember you are not stupid and if you are confused it is for good reasons. So you say for example " I don't understand what you said, if you can say it differently. I'd like not to proceed further until it makes sense to me. I'm not stupid, and it doesn't make sense." This is a position of strength
2. Actively listen. Repeat what is being said but in your own words. "Are you saying "X?" This has several effects.
 - First of all, it prevents an avalanche of words. It slows down the conversation.
 - It establishes you as a co-leader of the conversation "Before you go further, I want to be sure I've understood what you are saying."
 - Also it allows you to highlight for later challenging some of the strange statements. "Are you saying "X?"
3. If you are being actively listened to, make SURE it is accurate. Sometimes a bully will pretend to have heard you and give a quick summary of your thoughts. This is a chance for you to give your approval of his summary. "Thank you for the paraphrase and I can see that, 'No. That's not quite what I meant.'"

Finally, don't expect any of these techniques to change the person's character. If they are domineering and bullying, they will remain so. Beside, this isn't a goal you want to embrace. What these things can help you do is keep control of your Self, your self-esteem, and most times, your division, your plans and projects.

A manipulative executive corrupts the corporate culture because when we are ordinarily confronted with manipulation, we tend to either counter-manipulate or capitulate. This dumbs down the dialog and also makes manipulation more widespread. Better to respond with integrity. The ways listed above are all responses with integrity.

(Rob Schrull is President of GBLA . Philip Belove, Ed.D., is staff psychologist/coach with GBLA)

Providing Development Solutions