

Breaking the People-Pleasing Cycle

Welcome to this helpsheet from Live Your Performance and Chris Rawden. It is a fortnightly leadership-themed piece focused on providing valuable insights and new perspectives for leaders and their teams.

Are you prone to people-pleasing?

One thing I hear regularly, whilst coaching C-Suite leaders and their teams, is team members worrying about their CEO's reaction if they raise an issue they are finding challenging. The team member typically either avoids raising the issue at all or downplays it so the problem remains invisible to the CEO. The result – the team member finishes yet another meeting with their CEO frustrated because they have once again not communicated the thing that was really important for them.

Consider yourself for a moment. Are you comfortable in such situations and able to raise what's important for you, or are you more prone to playing safe, to preserve harmonious relations and avoid a confrontation? You could be either the team member or the CEO in this example.

Consider where you would rate yourself on a scale from 0 (willing to risk conflict) to 10 (having to please people). If you're between 5-10 and not satisfied with being this way, read on.

What lies behind your need to please people, where you don't speak your truth in a situation that you strongly believe requires it? Maybe you experienced early in life that speaking out of turn was a taboo.

If you were punished whenever you spoke your truth back then, you may have decided this was too painful and done everything to protect yourself from re-experiencing that pain and isolation. Instead your priority is to be accepted, so it has become normal for you to avoid risking a conflict.

The downside of this pattern is that while it keeps you out of conflict, it costs you your authenticity and self-expression. These sadly remain hidden under your pretence of agreement, leaving you having to deal with that voice in your head telling you to speak up for what you really think and believe.

Steps to break the cycle

Depending on where you put yourself on the 0-10 scale of people-pleasing, there are some practical steps you can take to move yourself further in the 0 direction.

- Firstly be straight with yourself about your people-pleasing pattern and own up to it. This is already an important first success in self-compassion and acceptance, which is the prerequisite for making any change.
- You can now start to imagine new ways to step up and act differently. Try to recall a key moment in your past that was decisive in determining who you became at that moment when you stood up for yourself and got punished for it. Consider why you decided you needed to please people e.g. to avoid pain and rejection.
- As you look back at your younger self, be compassionate towards the younger you from that time. You could not decide how to behave then, because your parents/guardians were responsible for teaching you how they wanted you to behave. And remember your parents/guardians were influenced by what they experienced from their parents/guardians.
- Now, as an adult, the context is different. You are a free agent and you get to decide how you live your life and what values you live by. It is your responsibility to do so.
- Little by little is how we effect change. Take it one step at a time. Each step in a new direction takes courage and gives you a small but valuable glimpse of something new. Each action taken triggers a dopamine response from the brain's reward centre. "As you start to walk on the path, the path appears" according to Rumi.

Practical strategies

Here are some ideas for action and reflections for you:

- Identify a low-hanging fruit situation, a less challenging conversation than a conflict but where you will still need to stretch yourself a little. In this situation, can you stretch yourself a little and share your perspective authentically? You can use this experience to test the water and see if the reaction you get is what you are expecting.
- Step back and reflect on the impact your people-pleasing has on your own energy levels and productivity. As a leader, how can you recalibrate a little to rebalance (not remove) your need for harmony with your leadership priorities?

- Avoid the pitfall of equating popularity with respect. Respect from a team comes from how leaders make difficult decisions. Can the team see that their leader is mindful and compassionate about the impact of their decision for those team members who are in disagreement and feel disappointed, seeing the leader take time to listen to and engage with those people?
- Choose your priorities as a leader. What message are you sending your team if you put off dealing with problems they have reported, e.g. a colleague whose behaviour is causing problems continues to dominate because you haven't intervened. You tell yourself that is because you don't want to demotivate the colleague from being ambitious, even though you see her behaviour is killing your team's morale? For your team, seeing you dealing with those challenging staff matters is important, even though there is no pain-free solution.

Final thoughts

So, regularly step back to consider what's realistic and what's an illusion in the objectives you're setting yourself. If you need to make difficult decisions, expect some collateral damage. An imperfect decision is often better than no decision. People will respect you as a leader for your commitment and decisiveness in demanding challenges. They may even like you for it. But don't wait to be liked: step out of your people-pleasing comfort zone a little - and observe what difference it makes to your leadership.

I provide one to one and team coaching for leaders and their organisations. If you recognise something in what I've outlined here and would like to check what support options could be helpful for you and your team, please get in touch.