

leadership instalments

The Pain Problem

By Dan Gaynor

Some years ago authors Philip Yancey and Dr. Paul Brandt collaborated to describe pain as the gift nobody wants. Pain is a force leaders must all come to grips with.

From a leadership perspective, pain often provides the motivation to correct a bad habit, or to lead someone out of the wrong work and into right work, providing for lasting job satisfaction, but fear of this same pain prevents too many leaders from taking the steps they should to resolve genuine performance issues. Both the individual involved and the team are disadvantaged. Emotional pain is universal because it serves a purpose. As leaders come to accept the constructive role it often plays, they are far more inclined to take the steps they should to build strong teams and teach important lessons.

As effective leaders become aware of performance problems the first step is always to provide corrective feedback - a simple 2-5 minute coaching conversation that describes the problem, the negative outcomes it's giving rise to and the change that is required. Caring and fair leaders voice their concerns as soon as they arise and they hope for the best outcome. This minimizes damage and provides the best likelihood of a successful correction, but the pain problem often prevents leaders from holding even these initial conversations.

The individual loses the opportunity to correct a problem early and the team must accommodate a poor performer. As performance issues progress and intensify so too does the deterrent effect pain can have on leaders.

Poor performance can be grounded in aptitude (not everyone has every talent and too many people work in jobs they will never enjoy

or be successful with because they lack this prerequisite), and or attitude (he refuses to take direction: she won't stop arguing with everyone around her, etc.) Pain is often a part of the resolution. When caring leaders respond to aptitude problems with feedback and coaching, and performance does not improve, aptitude is confirmed as the culprit. These are often the more difficult situations because the performer may be trying hard, but just not getting the job done. Effective leaders hold everyone accountable to minimum performance standards and pain for those who continue to come up short mounts. This often makes it easier for leaders to suggest a change that often entails leaving the company for a new start

somewhere else. Whether the departure is voluntary or forced, it is never best to allow someone to stay in a job they will not succeed at.

When skillful leaders respond to attitude issues with corrective feedback and there is little or no evidence of improvement, they will warn a second time and make it clear that the offender is putting his or her job at risk. When this or even a third warning is ignored it is time to end the relationship. Sometimes people have to lose a job, or two or three, to learn a lesson. It may be that the pain of job loss motivates a change for the better. To allow the behavior to persist without doing something is to become an accomplice to the problem.

Pain often motivates positive change because it forces us to address it at its source, nothing else brings relief. Caring leaders never deliberately cause pain for others, however they do accept it as a natural by-product of their work. In doing so, they serve the interests of the teams and the people they lead.



Discussion Questions:

1. When has pain played a constructive role in your life?
2. When was the last time fear of pain stopped you from taking steps you should have taken to resolve a performance issue? What were the consequences?

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