

# Reflecting on Office Behavior

## Career Coaches Help People See Themselves From Co-Workers' Perspectives

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Lucy Stribley was a take-no-prisoners, there's-no-excuse-for-mistakes kind of rising-star boss several years ago. Although she wanted her team to succeed, few would have considered her warm and fuzzy. In fact, the people she managed at consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton Inc. had dubbed her the "weedwhacker."

Stribley's boss, by contrast, is what she calls a Care Bear. When her boss told her she needed to change the way she communicated with employees, Stribley, 35, just didn't get it.

So Stribley's boss got her a coach.

Less than a decade ago, few people knew what an executive coach or career coach was. Today, companies hire them to work with employees, hoping to build executive potential into reality. The cost isn't small, but companies that use coaching services say the return on investment can be huge.

Stribley, on maternity leave with a daughter, says her coach changed the way she worked, the way her team worked and, frankly, her life.

One of the first things the coach did was ask the people Stribley managed for input. The employees called Stribley impatient. They said she didn't care about people.

Stribley was not happy with the results of this survey and fought with the coach, saying the assessments were wrong. All she ever did was try to help people succeed, she argued. But Stribley began to understand, with a bit of coaching, that much of the problem was perception. Even if Stribley told people they were wrong because she wanted them to do better, employees perceived in her tone and body language that she was attacking them. And that's why her employees read her as cold and uncaring about them and about their careers.

In fact, Stribley thought she was a better manager for telling it like it is. She wanted to be the first to tell under-performing employees that they weren't living up to her standards. "I don't think it's fair that they're the last to know," she said. "But what was happening is people read [my actions] in a different way."

So with some guidance, she learned to say things like: I may be making you a little uncomfortable here, but my intent is to help you succeed. "When I finally got it, it was so simple," she said.

Stribley's coach helped her realize that her actions made her unapproachable. Many of her employees at the time were just starting to have babies. Stribley knew they thought of her as a career-only woman, so she brought in pictures of nieces and nephews. She hung pictures of co-workers' children on her wall. Suddenly, she was an open, real person, it seemed, rather than a careerist with no interest in life outside work. She was "changing my posture," she said. It perked up her employees and made the team more cohesive.

When Stribley decided to take on an executive MBA program at Wharton in addition to her job, her coach helped her figure out how to balance everything. She proposed that she work a compressed workweek, so she still worked full time, but took Fridays off to study. It was something she never would have let herself do without some guidance.

Booz Allen hired a consulting company this year to study the return on its coaching program. The study found that all of the leaders applied what they learned to improve their own development, while 53 percent went beyond that to make significant improvements in their relationships with teams and peer members.

The benefits were \$3.3 million in the year 2003, while the coaching for last year's 45 participants cost \$414,310. That means the return on investment was 689 percent, according to the study.

"This is just the beginning," said Vernita Parker-Williams, program manager at Booz Allen. "Being able to provide one-on-one tailored development" is invaluable, she said.

But you don't have to tell Janet Lyman, a principal at Booz Allen, about that. She had been told she could be a bit more patient with people, a little less direct and a touch more empathetic. When she acquiesced and worked with a coach in late 2000, she realized how valuable the process was and wanted to share it with the team she managed.

In one discussion, her coach explained to the group that employees should approach conflicts by first pointing out what the two parties agree upon. While discussing this, a co-worker noted that perhaps they could use this tactic in a difficult meeting the next day, when they were going to try to hold on to a client who was about to take business elsewhere.

The team held an emergency meeting and changed its entire approach for the next day's gathering. "We knew it would be a tough meeting," Lyman said. But by pointing out the commonalities first, then approaching the disagreements, the larger group came to a satisfying conclusion: The client kept Booz Allen and awarded them two contracts.

Most people who joined the program came in as a result of a review, when their boss suggested they get a coach. And many of them did not jump into the process enthusiastically. "I came at this as a doubter," said Marty Hill, vice president. But he said he quickly recognized the value in it and asked his leadership team to improve some of the interactions within the group.

Now, after 30 years as a manager, he is thinking about retirement. "What really gets you up in the morning is wanting to build a legacy, make an organization good for the people who are in it now, so they have chances to do things in their careers," he said. "And this experience has made me much better at being able to transmit those values to the people I work with."

"I work with a lot of technical, intellectual all-stars," said Leslie Williams, who coached Lyman and her team. "They have an underdeveloped understanding of the subjective part of business: the relationship side. That's where leadership happens."

Which is why Stribley didn't mind putting up a few baby pictures on her wall. Her coach helped her see things that her boss was not able to articulate. "I didn't have to change who I was," she said. She just had to adjust how she was perceived.

Granted, Stribley did not turn into Glenda the Good Witch right away. At first, she said, "I felt like I was declawed." She held back from giving feedback and messages. She would spend a couple of days figuring out how to approach someone, whereas in the past she would state her feelings as soon as she had them.

But since then, she has calibrated herself, she said. "I tend to make decisions about what's right for the business first, and people second. That's okay. But there's a lot of leeway in that," she said. "Now, people who join the group think *I'm* a real Care Bear."

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