



Find the Fear

by Grace L. Judson

It's simple: fear is at the heart of just about all unproductive behavior. Whenever anyone seems particularly stubborn, unresponsive, blind to what's happening, unwilling to collaborate or compromise, you'll almost certainly find fear.

Of course, the person involved is unlikely to admit it, even to herself. No one wants to admit to being afraid, especially not at work where there's so much invested in being confidently decisive. (That would include you!)

When fear is involved, rational discussion, logical argument, and apparently obvious reasoning gets you exactly nowhere (except frustrated!). So before you try to persuade — or command, for that matter — take a moment to put yourself in the other person's situation and ask yourself a few questions.

1. What might concern, worry, or bother you if you were in her shoes?
2. What do you know about the person that could help you understand where his anxieties lie? For instance, some status-conscious managers feel that the number of people who report to them is a direct indicator of their importance. Reduce the head count of their team, and they feel very threatened and fearful.
3. Looking at the answers to these questions, can you see a fear-driven logic to their actions? It may still not "click" for you personally — your fears in similar circumstances could be quite different — but when you look at a situation from an external perspective, the reactions and behaviors of others often suddenly make sense.

As you go through this process, try to stay away from judgment and criticism. Fear isn't rational. Your goal is to be as objective and compassionate as you can, so that you can use your understanding to have a more productive conversation.

Once you've found the fear (and remember that you're making educated guesses; don't decide that you're 100% correct!), consider how you can address it without making the other person feel even more vulnerable and fearful. Your word choice is crucial; you want to create more safety, not less!

When you connect *gently* with the fear and demonstrate that you understand it, the other person is much more likely to be able to hear and respond rationally to your logical approach to solving the problem — especially since you'll be in a position to create solutions that acknowledge and respond to his fears.

Here are a few tips for connecting and creating safety. Mix and match; don't just go with one; they work especially well in combination.

Be Curious

Ask leading questions that start with "I wonder" or "What if?" It's a great way to approach touchy subjects with caution and compassion. For instance, "I wonder what you're feeling about the staffing shakeup?"

Be Abstract

Remove the other person from your questions or comments and talk in the third person — or even put yourself into the situation. You might say something like, "I know I'd feel disrespected and really annoyed if they told me I was going to lose half my staff!"

Be Quiet

After you've made a comment or asked a question, allow silence to play a part in the conversation. When anxieties run high, it can take someone a few moments to collect her thoughts and decide how to respond. If you can wait without jumping in to fill what may feel like an endless pause, you're much more likely to get a sincere and thoughtful response. *And* you're more likely to avoid saying anything you'll regret later!

Be Careful

Go slowly, and stay alert for signs that you've made someone feel *more* nervous and fearful rather than less. When you proceed with caution, you can truly become the hero of the situation, as several of my clients have enthusiastically reported to me. Go too fast, pick the wrong words, or state the wrong assumptions as if they're facts, and you run the risk of making the situation worse, not better.

In Summary...

When you look at any odd or off-kilter situation objectively and compassionately, you can identify what fears could be at play. Then you can offer solutions that respond to those fears. Do this a few times, and you'll develop a reputation for insightful negotiation and mediation skills. You'll also find that by being honest with yourself about your own fears, you'll feel more grounded, less anxious, and more able to make decisions that are responsive to what's really happening instead of what you're afraid might happen.

"Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less."

Marie Curie (1867-1934), Polish-born French physicist and chemist, only winner of Nobel prizes in two different fields (Physics and Chemistry), and first female professor at the University of Paris.

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