



Imaginary Dragons

by **Garold Markle**

Sometimes the problem you think you see, is not the problem you actually have.

When Carl, the CEO, described to me the difficulties he was having with Theron, his CFO, it sounded pretty bad. There was no smoking gun, mind you. Theron was more than competent, having successfully performed his job for more than twelve years. Over the last several months, however, Carl felt that a negative fog had enveloped their relationship. He was particularly disturbed at the lack of support from this critical executive team member for what everyone else seemed to regard as exciting growth initiatives. Each time the CEO talked about his ideas for a dynamic future in front of his CFO, he received what he perceived to be an unenthusiastic non-supportive response. For lack of a better term, we labeled the Area for Improvement using the positive headline “Enthusiasm” and clarified the desired response as “Sharing excitement for growth programs.”

If you’re familiar with Catalytic Coaching, you know that the coach (in this case the CEO) is required to draft a version of what he thinks he wants to say to the direct report (CFO), but then sets it aside before presenting it to him. Before speaking and delivering advice, the coach is required to listen. As part of what we call an “In-Flight Training” process, I was actually in the room to watch what happened next.

Theron followed the script and presented his coaching input material to his boss. The delivery was somewhat muted but the content was pretty straightforward. There were no big surprises in terms of Accomplishments, Disappointments or Developmental Activities. He was equally flat with respect to his desires for the future. Theron seemingly already had his dream job, even though he often appeared to be pretty miserable in it. It wasn’t until the hygiene section (where we talk about pay and benefits) that we encountered the unexpected.



“I feel that I’m underpaid and that our salaries should be reviewed again,” the CFO said. “More than anyone, I know our cash flow challenges, but that doesn’t mean it should be taken out on me.”

As advised, the CEO resisted the temptation to react immediately. Instead, he asked for clarification and received what he needed to research the situation and respond in a separate meeting.

Theron reviewed some final comments that he’d written about board meetings and feeling a bit out of touch, but he moved through that material rather quickly and without special emphasis. We adjourned the input meeting and established a time for the coach to respond and give his guidance.

Before the second session, I did a little digging into the CFO’s background. Theron had two years of formal education in accounting from a small local college. No CPA. No MBA. In his twelve year tenure, he’d seen the company increase dramatically in size. It was now literally five times larger than when he started. To make a long story short, in my reasonably objective outside opinion, he didn’t have the paperwork to survive a first round screening of the current job, if it were posted to fill a vacancy.

Carl had no real problem with Theron’s technical capabilities, but... it didn’t make sense that he was underpaid relative to the market. In fact, compared to peers at the same company, he appeared quite fairly compensated.

So here is where the plot thickens. Theron just happens to be black. As an ex-HR executive with a long association with big companies, my spidey senses were tingling. Theron also just happened to be the only black member of the executive team, only black manager, etc. in an area where they are probably already statistically underutilized from an Equal Employment Opportunity perspective. “Danger! Danger, Will Robinson!” to quote a classic television show.

The CEO asked what to do. He knew that he was being fair and unbiased, but that didn’t change potential appearances. He couldn’t believe that his longtime friend and senior associate would actually bring him to court, but there seemed to be some real pent up negative energy between them.

I advised Carl to hold his course. He needed to have an “adult to adult conversation about money” with someone who counts money for a living. The salary he was paying Theron is more than fair and competitive for the credentials and skill set brought to the party. If anything, Theron’s title is a bit inflated. For their size company, most organizations have a Controller, not a true CFO.

Carl did an admirable job of suppressing his nervousness as he started the coaching session with a direct response to the prior salary inquiry. “Theron, I’m not going to be able to make a big adjustment to your salary at this time, and here’s why.” Carl walked Theron through the logic outlined above and, to both of our surprise, Theron’s response was completely reasonable. He understood the points and stated that he both understood and agreed.

“You know, I’ve thought about the title thing,” said Theron. “I normally call myself ‘Controller’ when I describe what I do to other people, including my family. I’d be okay, if you want me to change my title.”



Carl quickly and emphatically told Theron that he was not campaigning to reduce his title. It would be fine to make the switch, if Theron wished to do so, but it was not a necessary change from Carl's vantage point. The sense of relief was evident in both of them, having faced and conquered the imaginary dragon.

The more routine coaching session began on a high note and went very smoothly. That is, smooth until they got to Area for Improvement number four. The seemingly innocuous request to show more "Enthusiasm" stopped the show. After an incredulous look, there was prolonged and painful silence, and finally tears. Lots of them.

"You know," said the CFO, "it's hard to be supportive of programs that you're not involved in creating, especially ones that impact your portion of the organization so dramatically. You never include me in making the decisions anymore."

The CEO looked crestfallen. "What do you mean, Theron? You know I value your opinion?"

"Well, then why do you keep having meetings and I'm not invited?" the CFO responded. "You meet with Operations and HR all the time and leave Finance out of the loop completely."

I won't belabor you with any more details of the conversation, but suffice to say that there were misunderstandings and hurt feelings aplenty. It was also a classic case of negative begetting negative. "You're not included, so you're in a bad mood. You're in a bad mood, so I don't include you." In short, it's very hard to break that cycle without both parties agreeing to start over and try different tactics.

So, how can you learn to get beyond presenting problems to actual problems?

- **Structured Conversations:** It's not enough to have good intentions. It's not enough to "talk all the time." Establish an ongoing process, like [Catalytic Coaching](#), to surface needs and work through even unknown difficulties.
- **Seek First to Understand:** Always listen actively before speaking. Shut your mind off from preparing your next comment and probe for greater insight.
- **Knots:** Psychiatrist R.D. Lang has written extensively on the concept of logical negative do-loops. He calls them "knots." Study his work as an aid to understanding the troubled mind.
- **Fill a Vacuum:** If you ask cleverly, listen carefully and still discover no problem, try floating a desirable solution with your troubled partner. If you've guessed wrong, it will probably be revealed.



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