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# COACHING STRAIGHT TALK:

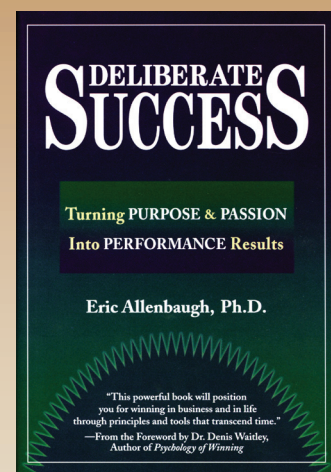
*Tough on Issues & Tender on People®*

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Written by G. Eric Allenbaugh, Ph.D.

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# COACHING STRAIGHT TALK:

## *Tough on Issues & Tender on People®*

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*"The job of a wise teacher  
is to help another to become."*

Stephen Covey

Coaching — bringing out the best of others — requires that you talk straight with your associates. Improving performance depends on clear, timely, caring feedback that is tough on issues and tender on people. As an effective coach, you need to have the courage to speak "your truth" and to provide a safe environment to receive "their truth."

Many managers, however, find it hard to speak their truth — even knowing that people cannot improve their performance without effective feedback. So why do we sometimes avoid telling our truth? It might hurt the feelings of others. It's uncomfortable. It's stressful. And — we might even get the truth back.

*"Be willing to tell your truth — sooner!"*

Alan Cohen

For whatever excuses, avoiding dealing with sensitive issues often results in those same issues

becoming the proverbial eight hundred-pound gorilla. Rather than dealing directly with sensitive issues, we sometimes dance around the point, drop indirect hints, avoid, or become so diplomatic that no one has the slightest idea what we are talking about. In my former career as a hospital administrator, I experienced the following situation that illustrates the point:

*Frustrated and angry, a department head came into my office seeking my approval for him to immediately fire one of his poorly performing employees. The employee worked in the hospital for over five years and had never been particularly effective. In fact, according to the department head, he periodically interrupted his mediocre performance by making some rather serious mistakes that endangered the lives of patients. Two such blunders in the last week jeopardized patient safety and prompted the department head to finally take action.*

*When I asked what the employee knew about his chronic poor performance, the manager responded: "He has to know! He's been here for five years." Not finding that to*

*be a satisfactory answer, I asked to see the employee's performance evaluations for the last five years. From the employee's personnel file, we pulled the five performance evaluations and placed them in chronological order in front of us on a conference table.*

*What do suppose they said about his performance for the past five years? You guessed it! Each annual performance appraisal reported overall ratings ranging from "satisfactory" to even as high as "outstanding." I said to the manager: "I don't understand how these evaluations can be as good as they are when you said his performance has been so poor all these years." After a long pause, the department head said quietly: "Well, I didn't want to hurt his feelings." I asked, "What do you suppose firing him will do to his feelings?"*

***"Truth is the grand simplifier."***

Will Schutz

We both learned from this experience. It became apparent to me that I needed to be clearer about my expectations of department directors to hold themselves and others accountable through clear, straight talk. He learned that avoiding issues and not shooting straight generally worsens the situation. How about you? What courageous conversations might you be avoiding? What consequences might you experience from not dealing directly with issues calling for attention? (By the way, in the interest of patient safety, we did terminate the employee.)

## COMMUNICATION SUCCESS CRITERIA: COURAGE & SAFETY

Effective coaching requires an open communication exchange between the coach and the associate. Both safety in *seeking* the truth from others and courage in *speaking* your truth are essential in dealing with performance issues and in supporting personal and professional growth.

I feel "safe," for example, when I can candidly be me when I am with you. And for "me to be me" means that I can safely share what I am thinking, feeling, and wanting in a way that also honors the other person. Likewise, effective communication exchanges require the courage to both self-disclose and give honest feedback to others. Combining safety and courage in this context enables people to connect with far greater clarity and mutual understanding.

Unfortunately, many managers have difficulty in telling their truth about performance issues to employees in a timely, direct, and caring way. Performance issues are often ignored (tender on issues) or dealt with harshly (tough on people.) Another common problem occurs when managers accumulate performance information on employees and then do a "data dump" during their annual appraisal.

Can you imagine a football coach observing his players in action throughout the season, keeping track of what they did well and what they did poorly, and then calling each player in at the end of the season to give them feedback about their annual performance? The "coach" would soon find himself looking for a new job. Whether in the corporate environment or on the playing field,

quality, timely, constructive coaching provides the foundation for deliberate success. As Ken Blanchard frequently says, *“Feedback is the breakfast of champions.”*

*“Three things become obvious:  
The sun, the moon, and the truth.”*  
Buddha

## THE 4 “TRUTH TESTS”

For fear of telling “the truth,” two kinds of lies are often shared during performance evaluations: 1) distorting the truth, and 2) withholding the truth. The moment one distorts or withholds their truth, relationship separation begins, mutual understanding declines, and non-productive behaviors increase. The quality of an effective working relationship, therefore, is a function of how much truth is exchanged. Telling your truth, as you know it, greatly simplifies the communication process and takes the guesswork and game playing out of relationships. While I am not advocating “compulsive truth telling,” I am encouraging you to be both authentic and “in service” as a foundation for effective coaching.

Rather than have others guess how you evaluate their performance, you can assist their growth and development by reinforcing that which is going well and by dealing directly with the issues. If you are wondering whether it is advisable to deal with an issue, consider the following “truth tests,” based largely from an ancient Asian philosophy:

1. **Is it true?** Be careful with this – for there are three “truths:” 1) “my truth,” 2) “your truth,” and 3) “The Truth.”

What you believe to be “the truth” may merely be your perception of The Truth.

2. **Is it kind and respectful to deal with the issue?** Consider not only the involved individual, but also those who may also be affected by the situation. Sometimes not dealing with a situation is disrespectful to both the individual and to those indirectly involved.
3. **Is it necessary to confront the situation?** Consider the short and long-term consequences of confronting — and of not confronting — issues requiring attention. As in the case of the five-year hospital employee, patient safety necessitated dealing with the situation.
4. **Is it timely?** Being sensitive to timing in dealing with a situation can have a significant impact on the results achieved. In most cases, dealing with the situation close to the triggering event will more likely produce a positive outcome than will procrastinating.

*“Be willing to tell your truth — sooner!”*  
Alan Cohen

## THE 3 COMMUNICATION STYLES

People typically practice three communication styles: 1) passive, 2) aggressive, and 3) assertive. You are likely familiar with these in both your personal and professional experiences.

Passive or indirect communication forces the other person to guess about what you are really thinking,

feeling and wanting. Both tender on people and tender on issues, this indirect style avoids resolution and typically increases interpersonal tension and frustration.

The previously described story about the department director who wanted to fire the five-year hospital employee demonstrates passive communication. The employee had every right to assume that his performance was, in fact, satisfactory — given his manager’s inaccurate feedback. Because passive communication tends to both withhold and distort feedback, others find it hard to know for sure when someone is really telling the truth or merely walking through another communication facade. As a result, performance issues tend to worsen as employees become increasingly unaware of their unawareness. How can one be expected to improve performance if they do not receive honest feedback?

***“Shovel while the piles are small!”***

Author unknown

Aggressive communication reflects the “*I just tell it like it is – if they can’t handle it, that’s their problem*” kind of attitude. This communication style damages relationships and even encourages recipients to shift their focus from their own performance issues to the unfair, insensitive manner in which they were addressed. The message gets lost because of the way in which the messenger delivered the feedback.

Dealing with difficult performance matters requires sensitivity to The Human Element while dealing directly with the issues. Straight talk, or assertive communication, matches your outer expression (what you say) with your inner

experience (what you are thinking, feeling, and wanting) while simultaneously treating others with respect. By talking straight in a caring way, you can separate the person from the issue or behavior. Caring straight talk and effective feedback provide the coaching vehicles for developing others. As you have already concluded, this method combines the essential ingredients of simultaneously being tough on issues and tender on people.

Imagine I am your manager and we are meeting to discuss your performance. Having just talked about your strengths, I say to you: “*Let’s talk about your weaknesses.*” What happens inside? Chances are, you become tense, your stomach tightens up, and you feel the need to withdraw. You might even want to take the opportunity to thoroughly explore my weaknesses. This is not the best time to have a quality, open discussion about performance issues.

Now, imagine that once again I am your manager, and we are in a performance evaluation. We have just talked about your strengths, and I say to you: “*Let’s explore ways in which you can be even more effective, things that you can do more of and less of that will both enhance your long-term career fulfillment and serve this organization at a higher level.*” Notice the difference in your internal response when we address these issues as “stretches” rather than weaknesses. If you are like most people, you feel more open, more receptive, and more willing to actively participate in generating ideas to enhance performance.

This approach deals directly, yet sensitively, with the issues while actively engaging the associate in the process of self-examination. People are much more likely to feel respected



and to have ownership of the ideas emerging from this coaching strategy. This path directs creative energy to problem solving and attaining performance results. Negative issues are not ignored; instead, they are dealt with openly and in a caring way. Such respectful straight talk encourages the associate to join rather than resist you in the problem-solving process. People tend to support that which they assist to create. And, you are more likely to achieve lasting, positive results when reinforcing strengths and addressing stretches with your associate.

When given in the spirit of being both authentic and in service, feedback is a gift. Coaching positions the team leader and the associate to give and receive valuable performance feedback intended to create even more effective organizational results while building career fulfillment.

Some less-than-secure managers, however, may be threatened by the thought of exposing themselves to such honest two-way communications. Some people insulate themselves from feedback, thus creating a closed, low trust environment. Under these circumstances, “parking lot” meetings occur as communication channels erode and people look for other outlets to share “their truth.” People need to have the confidence that giving feedback to another person is safe and not subject to future reprisals – in any form.

*“Seek first to understand,  
then to be understood.”*

St. Francis of Assisi

## **BREAKING THROUGH THE COMMUNICATION BARRIER: Tools to Apply Safety & Courage**

Effective communication can occur only when people have the courage to speak “their truth” while simultaneously providing safety in receiving the “truth” of others. If the communication environment lacks either courage or safety, immediate blocks occur. So, how do you create more safety in the communication process? The following five steps facilitate connection and understanding — even in the most difficult of interpersonal circumstances:

1. **Pause.** When receiving difficult feedback, the normal reaction is to engage in self-talk or interrupt the communication process. Instead, pause and prepare yourself for active listening. Not just a brief “time out,” pausing is an internal resourcing process that enables you to get quiet and centered. Rather than reacting, pausing taps into what you intuitively know and enables you to respond with greater awareness and skill. Pausing intentionally brings out your best — rather than your baggage.
2. **Say: “Help me to understand.”** Asking for more feedback — even when you don’t even like what you are hearing — appears to be counter intuitive and possibly even self-deprecating. Encouraging people to talk with you rather than about you, however, creates a safe climate for exploring even the most sensitive of issues. Providing this degree of open communication encourages straight talk

while discouraging the usual “parking lot meetings” that typically follow communication disconnects.

**3. Listen with every bone in your body.**

Rather than listening, many of us are just waiting to talk, preparing our rebuttal, or rearranging our prejudices. None of these are listening. And remember — active listening is one of the highest forms of respecting others.

**4. Find a way to understand their facts, their feelings, and their perceptions.**

Even though you might not agree with the speaker, your present-moment mission is to seek understanding. Understanding builds respect, facilitates problem solving, enables you to connect, and also positions you to be understood later.

**5. Reward the feedback.** While you may not like or agree with the feedback, encourage your associate to continue open dialogue about even the most sensitive of issues. Say something like: “Thank you — that helps me to better understand your concerns and interests.” A simple “thank you” promotes positive and timely exchanges.

In a session that Stephen Covey and I co-facilitated with a client of mine, he introduced yet another effective tool designed to promote and encourage positive exchanges. When in conflict, Dr. Covey proposed asking the following question: “Are you willing to engage in dialogue until we are successful in coming up with a win-win solution?” What a powerful question! This strategy fosters

a spirit of partnership to co-create options for mutual gain. Whether problem solving, conflict resolution, or working through performance issues, this key question, coupled with the five-step method of providing communication safety, positions people to understand one another and to co-create mutually beneficial outcomes.

In contrast, note how the following true story created a condition of fear in the work environment:

*A city government client of mine experienced considerable problems within the fire department. Low trust levels, guarded communications, and fragmented teamwork characterized the organizational culture.*

*The Fire Chief said to me: “I used to get a lot of negative feedback about how things are going around here. I don’t get that feedback anymore. Things must be going better.” His lack of awareness contributed to some significant reality gaps.*

*After interviewing each of his Battalion Chiefs and station Captains, I learned that things were not going well at all. In fact, a near mutiny was in progress.*

*How could he have been so out of touch? Feedback from his leadership team provided a sobering reality check. At a recent meeting he called with his team, he reportedly said: “I want to get to the bottom of this once and for all. What’s going on in the department?” After some hesitation, a courageous Captain raised his hand and proceeded to give the Chief feedback — feedback he did not like to*

*hear. The Chief interrupted him, pointed his finger at the Captain, and said: “You — out in the hall!” He ordered the Captain out in the hall as the other members of the leadership team watched in disbelief!*

*Obviously, people stopped talking directly to the Chief, but they didn’t stop talking about him. “Parking lot meetings,” typically held at the kitchen table, soon replaced direct communication with the Chief. And the Chief was the main course for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.*

Some managers just don’t get how important it is to create a safe environment for constructive feedback. The Chief’s single action of ordering a Captain out in the hall solidified the lack of communication safety. Anyone with an IQ of two or less would know how inappropriate his actions were. Yet, many of us have done things to cut off open communications at work and at home — equivalent to saying: “*You — out in the hall.*” Those who don’t provide safety for open communications shoot themselves in the foot — and admire their aim!

***“The quality of a relationship  
is a function of how much truth  
is respectfully exchanged.”***

Eric Allenbaugh

In addition to providing safety, effective coaching requires the courage to speak your truth, especially as it relates to the following:

1. **Be willing to self disclose** what you are thinking, wanting, and feeling — especially regarding matters that count.

Don’t expect people to read your mind. Demonstrate the courage to state your needs and interests clearly, respectfully, and on a timely basis.

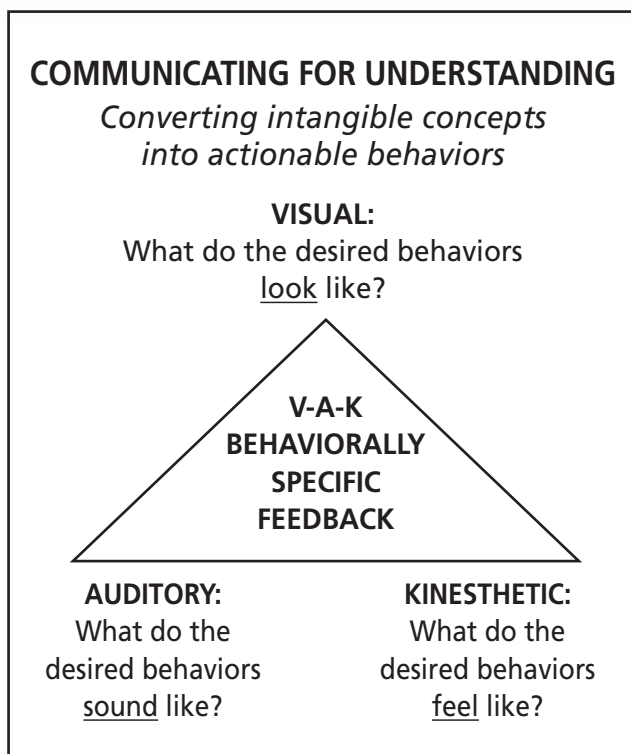
2. **Be willing to give feedback** to others about your observations and expectations. In particular, your coaching effectiveness can be enhanced by: A) reinforcing strengths, B) encouraging “stretches,” and C) clarifying performance targets and goals of your associates.

## **V-A-K FEEDBACK: Communicating with Clarity & Precision**

Have you ever had the experience of giving what you thought was crystal clear feedback to someone only to later discover they didn’t have a clue what you meant? Perhaps you have had this happen both at work and at home. I certainly have.

When giving feedback regarding The Human Element, avoid such ambiguities as “you need to improve your attitude” or “you need to be more respectful of others.” These vague terms are subject to a broad range of interpretations. Behaviorally Specific Feedback, instead, will more likely be understood when put into actionable terms. This kind of feedback, coming from the study of Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP), converts a somewhat intangible concept, such as “respect,” into actionable behaviors — how do I do respect?





By effectively describing behavioral expectations in terms of what do those behaviors look like (visual), sound like (auditory), and feel like (kinesthetic), people can more readily convert the intangible concepts into tangible results. If you are coaching a manager to be more “respectful,” for example, apply the following V-A-K (Visual-Auditory-Kinesthetic) communication tools to assure understanding of your expectations:

**What does “respect” look like?** I see you:

- Showing up to meetings on time,
- Periodically having lunch with staff members,
- Making rounds and connecting more often, and
- Acknowledging others through tangible memos and cards.

**What does “respect” sound like?** I hear you:

- Publicly acknowledging successes of others,
- Asking for ideas and advice of others,
- Thanking people for their contributions,

- Listening more than talking,
- Encouraging others to take risks,
- Asking for what people learned when making a mistake,
- Providing coaching feedback, and
- Drawing the answers out of others and using their talents more effectively.

**What does “respect” feel like?**

Around you, people feel:

- Safe and self-assured,
- A willingness to share even sensitive feedback, knowing that it will not come back to haunt them, and
- A sense of partnership and connection, both when you are around and when you are absent.

Don’t assume that people will understand your intent and meaning when you say things like “I want you to be more of a team player,” or “I want you to improve your attitude,” or “I want you to support me more.” Each of these is vague and subject to significant misinterpretation. Instead, convert the concept of “team player,” “attitude,” or “support” into tangible, behaviorally specific V-A-K language.

I have found that direct V-A-K feedback, given in the spirit of 1) being in service and 2) being authentic, facilitates a meaningful dialogue in even the most sensitive of situations. People stay with you, understand the message, and are more likely to join you in co-creating a behavioral action plan for improving their performance. Clarifying behavioral expectations in terms of what you would like to see, hear, and feel facilitates understanding and positions the associate to act with greater certainty. Through awareness, more effective choices can be made to enhance results.

Effective coaching requires that you be tough on issues and tender on people. Having the courage to share your truth while providing safety to others to speak their truth positions both to better understand one another, clarify expectations, and work together toward mutual solutions.

*"Communicating clearly is like using a phone number — you need all the digits to get through. If you leave a number out or put the area code at the end, see what happens. If communication is a phone number, intent is the area code."*

Rick Brinkman

As a coach, your job is to develop the talent of your associates by providing them with clarity of direction, encouraging them to use their "gifts" effectively, building their confidence, and enhancing their performance. Each of these coaching outcomes requires that you talk straight — to both understand and to be understood.

*"You can have everything in life you want if you can help enough other people get what they want."*

Zig Ziglar

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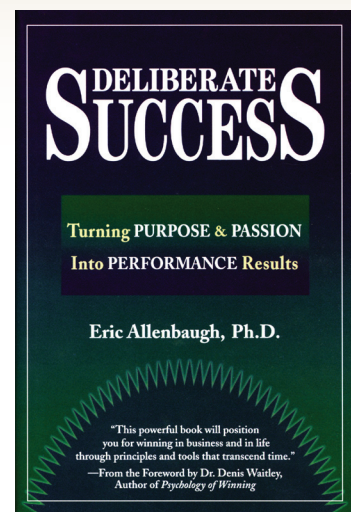
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