

Our Mission

To help individuals, teams and organizations reach their potential through strategic planning, innovative coaching, development of team effectiveness and management consulting.

Cook & Company Areas of Concentration

Strategy

Coaching

Assessments

Team Building

Consulting

Training

Workshops &
Retreats

Mergers &
Acquisitions

Ethical
Performance

What's Bad About Cheryl?

Mike: "I can't stand Cheryl. She is always twisting the facts to help support her side of the story. In fact, sometimes she actually makes up facts to support her position! I don't think she has good values! Don't you agree?"

What's your response to Mike? What should it be? How do you determine what it should be?

Both in our work and in our personal lives, we're often confronted with some variant of the above line of reasoning. How we respond not only says a great deal about emotional intelligence in dealing with others, but also with our own sense of self.

Here are some questions to help us respond appropriately, and to help Mike do so as well.

1. Is there another side to the story?
2. Regardless of the manner in which they have been conveyed, are some of Cheryl's facts substantively correct? Is it important to point out that possibility? And finally, how should that be done?
3. Why might Cheryl be distorting the facts? Is she doing it deliberately, or might there be some other reasons at work? What might they be?
4. What do we say to Mike?

Is There Another View of the Story?

Perhaps the easiest way to respond to a Mike (particularly if he is a colleague, a boss, or a good friend), is to agree. But is this the best

way to respond? What does it say about Mike that he is taking this position? What does it say if you agree with him without demonstrating your own thought process? What does it say to others if they are present when you agree? In virtually every setting there is, in fact, another view of the story being told. Here are some possibilities:

- Mike may be distorting the facts to support his own position.
- Mike may have misunderstood what Cheryl said.
- Cheryl may have inadvertently misstated the facts.
- You may in fact know that Mike is prone to hyperbole (or Cheryl may be), or is prone to misunderstand others, and need to factor that into your own search for a balanced view of the "story behind the story."
- The difference may just be the result of a different point of view, derived from differences in personality, cultural background, gender, positional authority – in other words, virtually any discriminator of diversity (and thus, potentially, in fact, very helpful!)

You owe it to Cheryl (and to yourself, as we will discuss later) to test whether any of the above possibilities are in play.

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Are some of Cheryl's facts substantively correct? Is it important to point out that possibility? How should that be done?

Just as "every book has some benefit to the reader," so too almost every story contains some element of "truth" (that is, some facts that we individually would recognize as "right").

You don't have to necessarily be a detective or have skill in cross-examination to test for the facts. Sometimes all it takes is a few innocent questions, like, "Mike, your theory is certainly plausible, but what do you think Cheryl really had in mind?" Or, "Mike, could Cheryl have possibly said . . ." When we ask such questions we're often surprised that even a gentle challenge can cause the story-teller to recognize that he/she may have come on too strong.

By calling attention to those facts that are buried somewhere in most stories, you can accomplish at least two worthwhile purposes:

- Sensitize yourself to the facts often found in stories, and use them to your advantage and that of your associates and organization going forward.
- Develop your reputation as someone who has, and constantly exhibits, those values of thoughtfulness, even-handedness, and fairness which most of us so highly prize.
- Stop a potential unpleasant incident among friends or colleagues before it develops its own momentum.

Why might Cheryl be distorting the facts? Is she doing it deliberately, or might there be some other reasons at work? What might they be?

Without psychoanalyzing Cheryl (or Mike for that matter), we have found in our

work that when individuals are perceived to distort the facts, they do it for fairly obvious reasons:

- They're doing so because they are so focused on their point that they selectively choose the facts, or interpret them in a way that helps support their point (see our Summer 2004 Commentary on the behavioral law of "anchoring").
- They have developed a habit of doing so because they are rarely challenged and have thus lost the power of critical thinking and its twin skill, critical communication.
- They have done so because the risk of being found out is seen by them as less damaging than the possibility that they might not successfully make their point.

In every one of these cases, there may be deeper psychological forces at work which contribute to the perception of "bad person, bad values, and/or bad behavior." The best response is not to fall into immediate judgment of that sort, but rather to approach the situation with objectivity and to use questions to coax out the underlying facts.

What do we say to Mike?

In a sense, we have already answered this question by suggesting that we question him about what might lie behind Cheryl's comment, and attempting to help him understand that there may be some valuable "truth" behind her comments.

Whatever we say, if we do so in a constructive, positive manner, we are likely to help him (and ourselves) improve the discourse of daily life, advance critical thinking skills, and contribute to the civility of life in general.

Next Issue? In our Winter Commentary, we'll discuss why it is more important for a leader to ask questions than it is to provide answers. We'll also suggest some ways to make your questions more powerful and more productive.