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You Are the Source of Your Suffering—and That's the Good News

One of the reasons leadership seems so tough right now is that a lot of focus and energy are dissipated on drama—gossip, judgment, resistance, and complaint—instead of productive, proactive work. When this is true in your organization, you feel you're working harder than ever before, and yet you don't get the results you want. Your frustration is high and your energy low. But it doesn't have to be this way. In this chapter, I help you assess how much of your and others' energy is being wasted on drama. I also discuss drama's main components and causes and why you should ban it from your office. Peace comes with the end of drama.

Suffering Is Optional: Stop Arguing with Reality

We all face the occasional setback or frustration, but suffering is optional. If you are suffering and peace is elusive, consider this counterintuitive idea: your mindset—not your circumstances—is the source of your pain.

Here's how it works: Think of a time when one of your coworkers received a promotion. You may have made an instant judgment such as, "That's unfair! What about me?" Such a judgment taps into deeply held—possibly unconscious or unquestioned—beliefs, such as:

"I am always overlooked while others are rewarded."
"I do all the work while brownnosers like her get all the glory."
"I spend my time doing my job, not playing politics—that's why I have yet to get a promotion. It's all about sucking up."

These ideas quickly coalesce into a story: "She is so political she was able to brownnose her way into that position without ever really accomplishing anything. I produce results, but around here only politics matter." Your judgment, plus your beliefs, become your story, and that always equals *stress*. Congratulations: you now work for a company that is unfair, political, unrewarding (at least for you) and promotes people for the wrong reasons. A company you have created in your own mind.

When things get tough at work, most of us think about quitting or moving to a different company. But I'm here to tell you: It is most likely your thinking—not your job—that needs to change.

When you look at the facts of the situation I just described, all you know for sure is that a coworker was promoted. The rest is your own fabrication, based on untruths such as "I never get chosen." (Yet, you were chosen for your current job over all other candidates, right?) Because of your judgments and beliefs, you pout instead of being helpful and adding value.

If, rather than judging and storytelling, you embraced reality, you would note that a promotion occurred and do the appropriate thing in such a situation: congratulate your coworker, offer to help in any way you can, and resolve to learn from her how to deliver what the company values. You'd be high on professionalism, low on drama, and investing in better relationships and mutual support in the future.

In this book, I relate many stories about the leaders I coach. But first I give you a personal example, just to prove that stressful story creation is a human condition from which none of us is immune.

As many of my followers know, I have four football-obsessed sons. As is so often the case, I was traveling the day that my younger boys played their city tournament game and I returned long after they had gone to bed. The next morning, I got up with the intention to be a fully present, caring mom to the boys in the few hours we would have together before I headed back to the airport.

The boys raced downstairs first thing, so excited. "Mom, we won the game! We won the whole tournament, we even beat the older kids!" Now, what would a fully present, kind, encouraging mother do when her boys give her that kind of news? I would hope that I'd congratulate them, tell them how proud I am of them, how great they are. I almost did, too, until the next words out of their mouths were, "And we have another game this morning—in an hour—and our uniforms are dirty!"

With that, my mind jumped to a story—the one about how I have to do everything around here and how their father is unsupportive and evidently incapable of planning ahead. So I skipped the praise and went straight to, "Where the heck is your dad?"

I found George upstairs, still in bed—lounging, it seemed to me—seemingly unconcerned. He even offered a potential solution. "Cy," he said, "no worries. I'll take the kids to the game early in their dirty uniforms, practice some tackling and rub 'em around in the field a bit and no one will ever know whether that dirt on their uniforms is new or old." I was horrified. What else went on here while I was gone? Did the kids get beer with breakfast? Blowing up my story that I had to do everything, that working women really do have a second shift, that stay-at-home moms would love to catch my brood arriving in dirty uniforms and judge me for it . . . I yelled at George, threw the uniforms in the washing machine, and got the kids to the game in the nick of time (uniforms slightly damp, but clean)—with everyone fully frustrated,

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distraught, and sad that our time together had been so stressful—just in time for me to head back to the airport.

On the way to the airport, I had time to mull over what had just occurred. I had acted based on my story rather than the facts: my kids told me they had won a championship and I yelled at them. George offered to help and I yelled at him. I spent my morning watching the laundry, wishing it would go faster, instead of enjoying time with the kids. I sent my kids out to play in wet uniforms as I contemplated divorce from their father, who is actually one of the most supportive partners around. George is willing to be the sole caregiver anytime I want or need to completely dedicate myself to the profession that I love. In fact, he was doing it right as I headed out of town! So you see, I'm also imperfect. When I got to the airport, I called home to apologize to everyone—for not giving them the benefit of the doubt, for not celebrating their success, and for jumping to conclusions. Once I confronted reality, I went very quickly from thinking that my family needed to change to seeing where I needed to change. The good news? I could rescue the situation by fixing what was wrong with my own mindset, dropping that self-inflicted drama.

In order to restore peace to your life, first you need to understand that the source of your suffering is not what happens to you but the stories you create about what happens to you. We all tell ourselves stories and live with the resulting drama, whether we are conscious of it or not. I call it "arguing with reality," and it's the single largest barrier to peace and success for most people. The only way to change it is by becoming aware of when and how you tend to do it.

Here are some other examples of what it sounds like:

"I shouldn't have to do this—it's not part of my job description."
"Other people should be more dedicated and motivated. Nothing
    would get done around here if it weren't for me."
"There's not enough time to get it all done."
"Our department is always having to clean up after others' mistakes."

"The boss just doesn't get it."

"He is always undermining me."

"My coworkers don't appreciate me."

"Management only cares about the bottom line."

"I'm underpaid for what I do here."

"It would be finished if they'd stop interrupting me with last-minute changes."

Learned Helplessness: Putting On the Shackles

You are arguing with reality whenever you judge your situation in terms of right or wrong instead of fearlessly confronting what *is*. When you are judging, you are not leading; not serving, not adding value. Your judgment is a waste of your time and energy—an opinion that cannot be proven and is only loosely based on the facts of a situation. When you argue with reality, you move away from the facts of a situation, assigning motive, making assumptions, and overwriting reality with a mental story, in which you are cast as the victim and someone else has all the power. On an average day, you and every other person in your organization waste two hours on unproductive thoughts like these. Over time, this habit of thought calcifies into a set of behaviors known as "learned helplessness,"[1] in which people begin to hold themselves back more effectively than any external circumstance or person ever could.

The perfect example of learned helplessness can be found at the circus. Have you ever wondered why the elephants—the strongest and largest animals in the circus—don't simply walk away? When an elephant is born, it only takes about two weeks for him to get strong enough to break his chains, but his trainers use this time to their advantage. The baby elephant, chained to a tree, will make many attempts to break free before giving up, but once he has given up, that's it. Although he grows

larger physically, in his mind, the chain is still stronger than he is. In effect, he imprisons himself. A lot of us live our lives the same way.

Learned helplessness is symbolized by battle fatigue, that moment when an issue is raised, people's eyes glaze over, and they say, "You know what? We've had that issue forever and there is really nothing we can do about it. We just have to learn to live with it." Humans may not be rational, but they are predictable. People will take a limitation from the external environment, internalize it, exaggerate it, and bolster it in their imaginations until they've shackled themselves. They tell themselves a story about what's possible and impossible, and that story informs their effort. Learned helplessness leads them to falsely attribute lackluster results to (fictional) wholehearted efforts.

For some time the conventional wisdom has been that we need to listen to unhappy employees, that leaders need to work on providing employees with the optimal circumstances in which to work. The conventional wisdom is wrong. If you encourage people to complain and to make excuses for their results, you encourage learned helplessness and the victim mentality that goes with it. You allow people to believe, in essence, "We cannot do our best work in suboptimal circumstances, and we are not 100 percent personally responsible for our results."

Personal Accountability in the Pursuit of Happiness

There is a competency that we have disregarded in the workplace for some time, and that is personal accountability. Personal accountability has great benefits for organizations, but it has an equal, if not greater, impact on the individual who practices it. (Pay attention, because I'm about to give you one of the best reasons of all to work on this.)

Those who study positive psychology used to think that happy people were ones who were not under stress. They have since discovered that happiness is not correlated with a lack of stress or a perfect environment.

(If it were, how many people could really describe themselves as happy?) It is correlated to the amount of accountability you accept in your life. That's right: the more responsibility you take for your results, the happier you will be. Which is really great news. Because seizing responsibility is a choice: to find peace and be happy and productive no matter what your circumstances. It has to come from inside. No one can give it to you, but no one can take it from you, either.

CY'S BOTTOM LINE

Happiness is not correlated to perfect circumstances or a lack of stress in your life, but to the amount of personal accountability you accept.

Once you realize this, it blows current theories of engagement out of the water. Leaders these days work so hard to keep employees happy—to keep them from being affected by the "shocks" of everyday working life. They hand out surveys and try to find out what they can do to reduce stress and perfect circumstances in the office. But in fact, none of this has any effect on employees' level of engagement. With the knowledge that accountability equals happiness, we can instead work to develop our employees so that they can have a real impact on what happens around them. Instead of trying to prevent the shocks (which is impossible anyway), we can help them become shock-proof.

If you are feeling deflated at the end of your day—or even sometimes at the beginning—I guarantee you that the stories you are telling yourself are like little holes in your tires letting all the air out. You will be happy and will have peace of mind to the exact degree that you accept responsibility for your results. Those who have learned this and other tools of Reality-Based Leadership leave the office energized, because they have had an impact and they have dealt with reality the entire day, to the best of their abilities.

At this point, you might be wondering what the appeal of arguing with reality and learned helplessness could possibly be. If this mindset is the root of all unhappiness, reduces productivity, increases drama, and poisons organizations, why does it persist? For one simple reason: it feels safer and easier to blame than to act. As long as we can blame something outside ourselves for our problems, we don't have to take responsibility for our actions. Often this is not a conscious thought. It manifests itself as frustration and poor results. If any of this sounds familiar to you, but you're still not sure of where your own organization stands in terms of drama, keep track of your answers to the following Yes/No questions.

Measuring Your Office's Freak-Out Factor

First, let's take a look at the behavior of the people in your office (since it's always easier to judge other people honestly than it is to judge ourselves):

1. Does your office suffer from Chronic Shock Syndrome (that is, are people in the habit of greeting change with surprise, panic, and blame)?
2. Are BMWs (bitching, moaning, and whining) common in your office parking lot?
3. Do people make decisions based on assumptions about the motivations of others?
4. When accounting for poor results, do people tend to use the words *they* or *me* or *us* with a lot of victim words (such as *ignored*, *screwed*, *excluded*) in between?
5. Do your coworkers spend more time judging and critiquing than they do helping one another?
6. Does feedback tend to be met with moping, defensiveness, or retaliation rather than change?
7. Are people more invested in being right than in getting the job done?
8. Do those around you exhibit signs of a victim mentality (lack of proactivity, ''us versus them'' attitude, believing themselves to be at the mercy of circumstances or fate)?

Next, how about your leadership?

9. Do you struggle with any of the following types of employees:

   a. Chronic underperformers
   b. Tenured employees whose skills are outdated
   c. Self-righteous top performers with an outsized sense of entitlement

10. Do you look around and see people who have mentally disengaged—but keep coming to work?

11. Do you look around and see people that you've mentally fired—but never told?

12. Do you still tolerate ''That's not my job'' as a response to a request?

13. Do you believe you are the only one in your organization who wants success as much as you do?

14. Do you spend most of your management time and energy on a few problem people while your best performers run on autopilot?

15. Do you and your employees spend more time playing not to lose than playing to win?

Count your ''Yes'' answers to assess your office's Freak-Out Factor.

1–5 ''Yes'' answers indicate a Distracting level of drama.

This level of drama will continue if you continue to allow it. It's time for you to step up as a leader. In Part Two, you'll learn Reality-Based coaching techniques that will help you get the most out of your people and reclaim time wasted on drama for productivity.

6–10 ''Yes'' answers indicate a Miserable level of drama.

You might as well put ''drama'' on your budget as a line item, because you are funding it in a big way. Chances are that much of the drama in your organization is starting with you. You'll need to start by working on yourself. In Chapters Two and Three, I help you get your mindset right. Then, you'll have to get relentless about changing the mindsets of your employees—or getting new employees. In the meantime, make this book your new best friend, or risk losing what you've worked so hard to build.

> 11–15 "Yes" answers indicate an Utterly Exhausting level of drama.
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> Time for a full-on cultural overhaul and Reality-Based Leadership intervention! It won't be easy, but it will be worth it when you see the results when your talent is used for productivity rather than drama. Drama will become a dirty word in your organization, and you'll see the effects in your bottom line. The turnaround starts now.

The best news in all of this is that through awareness comes change. Feeling bad about your level of drama won't improve the situation, but working with this book will. Drama is ultimately the result of a lack of clear leadership. If you as a leader do not embrace reality and deal with it directly, those you lead will not know how to invest the precious resources of their time and energy. That is why it's essential to start with you. Only when you have found the peace you need to lead will you be able to coach others effectively. In Chapter Two I show you a method that will help you begin to distinguish drama from fact and create new habits of thought: conscious and proactive ways to stop the argument with reality and start engaging fully with the world as you find it. It's the first and most important step to becoming a Reality-Based Leader.