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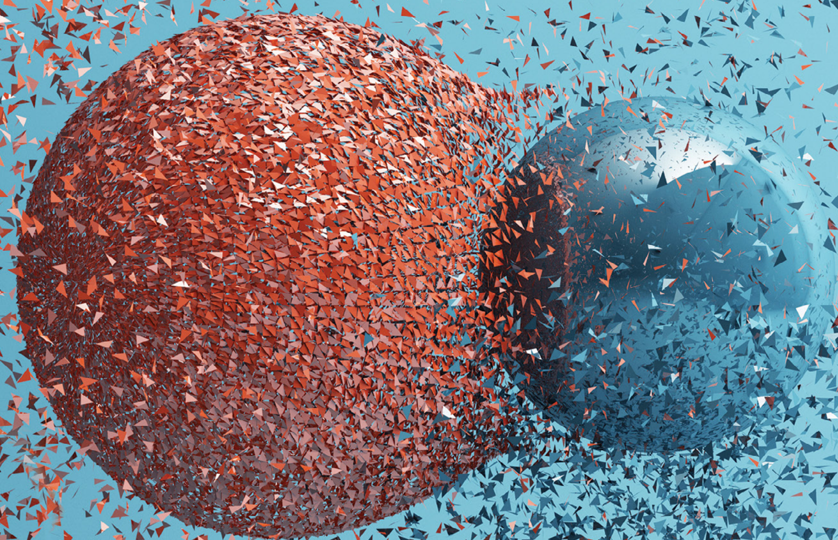

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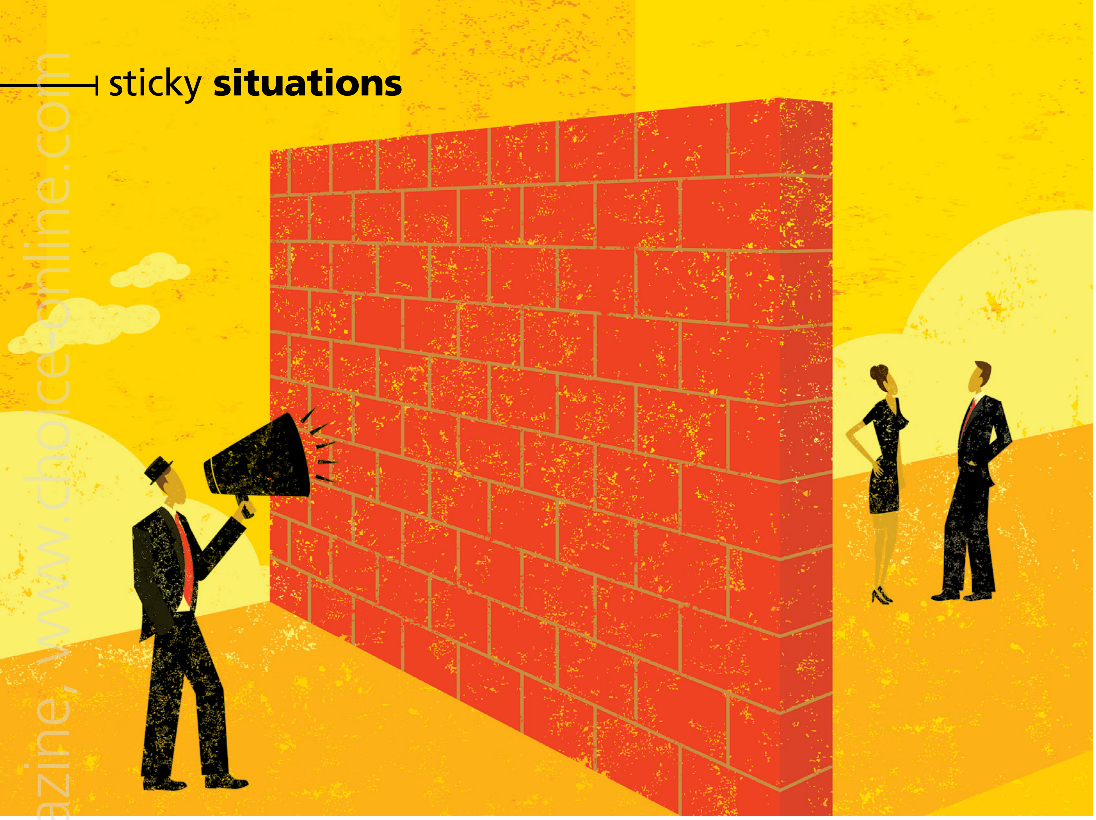

THE SITUATION

"I was recently hired to deliver feedback from a leadership 360 online assessment. The client 'freaked out' and refused to hear the feedback. What should I have done and how could I have handled the situation better?"

Feedback 101

THE EXPERTS WEIGH IN

By Suzi Pomerantz, MT, MCC

It is important to set the context before the client engages with any assessment, before they invite their first rater. Was this not your coaching client? Were you brought in just for the transactional debrief of a 360 that you did not administer? What was the established purpose of this 360? Was the leader aligned with the intention behind the assessment? What did the leader want to get out of the 360?

If those contextual and alignment conversations were skipped over, or if you were brought in at the 11th hour to debrief and give feedback to a client with whom you didn't already have an established trust and rapport, then the freak-out you described makes sense. Here's how you might handle the situation:

1. Do not agree to deliver feedback to someone you don't know.
2. Establish trust and rapport, learn of the client's intentions and objectives, understand what matters to that client BEFORE you discuss any feedback.
3. Understand the tool, what it is designed to show the clients, and how the results will be used in the organization.
4. Set context: "Feedback often tells us more about the person responding than it tells us about you, so listen within the context of your goals. If you hear anything useful and relevant to you, that's worth paying attention to. If you hear something that doesn't resonate as true, or is not helpful to you in terms of your goals and what matters most to you, disregard it. You are not required to believe any of this is true about you. Listen for patterns or themes. If we hear the same thing from a lot of folks, it's worth paying attention to. If we hear something from only one or two folks, it may not be as helpful. You have full permission to only take from this what is most useful and relevant."
5. Prime the pump. Ask, "what are you expecting to hear?" Steer the conversation towards the positives.
6. If your client is anxious, ask what they are most afraid of hearing in the feedback.
7. Give them all the power to credit or discredit what they hear, to contextualize or make meaning of the responses. Don't assume that what the 360 reveals is the full truth about the client.
8. Have the client review the results ahead of time, and start by asking them to walk you through their analysis of the assessment. What, if anything, are they taking away from it?
9. Tread gently. Read your client's mood, reaction, state of mind, and allow them space to process what they are hearing.
10. Be on the client's team and offer support, understanding, clarity, and scaffolding so they can take meaning from the feedback. Help connect the dots to a desired future, and to possible actions to take from this feedback.

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By Craig Carr, BCC, PCC, CPCC

The details are a bit thin, but in my opinion, it's not a coaching contract if all you're hired to do is deliver 360 feedback. What should you have done? First, start each coaching engagement by knowing everything possible about the circumstances you're stepping into. For instance, did the individual know about the 360 before you were chosen to convey the good and bad news?

This situation highlights an unnecessary problem I've seen coaches back into – again and again – for years. I'm a big advocate for designing working relationships (a life skill and a coaching skill) because when coaches slow down and do it, the work goes easier and faster, and becomes more fun for everyone.

What does "designed relationship" mean? I've written extensively about this elsewhere, but it's about taking time to establish agreements about how you'll begin, progress, resolve conflict, respect boundaries, complete, and everything in-between. It's not the "What are the goals for our coaching?" conversation; it's the "How will we be with each other?" conversation. It's a negotiation. It's not touchy-feely, and it doesn't have to take a long time (but it does need to be revisited, on occasion).

We can agree that learning occurs when we assess the past and not live in it, right? When you look back at the set-up going into the engagement, what were your motivations to say yes? What did you ask, or not ask, about the reasons for the 360 and the outcome the employer wanted? What authority were you granted or not granted? What might you change about the way you were introduced to the client? What assumptions were made, and dysfunctions stepped over that you know you could have challenged or clarified?

One good reason an expert comes into an organization is that a task is too risky for HR or a peer to handle. Given cultural restraints they may be under, consciously or otherwise, you can do and say things they might not be able to. Your role must have standing, clarity, and authority, however, which you establish by design. If you don't take this step, you may wind up with a client who freaks out and screams at you as if you're to blame for their problem. If that happens, and you've spent adequate time designing, you're in a very different game than if you just jumped in and assumed a relationship.

My intuition is that you arrived on the scene a) out of the ordinary and bringing attention to the client, b) given a "bad start" that can be emotionally difficult and hard to overcome, c) there to do the dirty work the client knew was coming, or d) all the above.

By Victoria Trabosh, CDC®, CEC

This is not uncommon, but without the context of the situation, I have more questions than answers. I'll eventually be sharing a concept with you that is the acronym LALA. (Teaser, that's all I'm saying right now!)

Here are my questions:

Beyond delivering feedback, did you administer the 360? How were participants prepared before they received the assessment? What were your client's expectations of the 360? How have 360s been delivered in the past at this company? What is the credibility of this tool to create awareness, change, and empower the person being assessed? While this is not an uncommon occurrence, did you feel as if the 360 was full of bad news? Is coaching a tool used throughout the company or only with employees facing problems?

As an executive coach for 18 years, assessments of all kinds become labels, not tools. A wide range of companies offers the 360 evaluation, and frankly, the results are as good as the pre-work done to prepare the assessors, conversations with the one being evaluated, and participation and acceptance and usefulness of this tool at the highest levels of the company. What often (too often) happens is that this tool, in particular, is used to anonymously 'confirm' bad news to the receiver. I have never met an executive who took this who wasn't nervous about receiving the feedback and spent more time focusing on the bad news than the good. Often, strong leaders minimize what they believe to be fair and maximize surprising or written bad news. I've heard it 100 times: "I know who said that!" when receiving sharp or direct negative feedback. Whether they are right or wrong, there is a problem. The coach must bring them back to the table to discuss the comment, not the accused assessor.

If you can, try and engage the client once more using the concept of LALA. "Look, Ask, Listen, Acknowledge." Developed by Jill Syle, author of *Reinvesting in Your Rhetoric* and my Harvard Professor who teaches advanced communication skills, it's the process of slowing down before we react. Help your client learn LALA. I ask you to try it with them.

The 360 is done. Don't let it create unease in your client. Try again, knowing this work is vital for their success. •

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