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When Wisdom Is Not Enough

Lucy began our conversation sounding breathy and exasperated. As the senior staff leader of a large healthcare organization, she voiced her anxiety about an emerging conflict between her board of directors and another organization. She had other concerns, too, but she was so emotional that she couldn't articulate them. After a little back and forth, she realized she was also worried about having a serious conflict with her own board chairman.

Although most readers of the "Coaching Forum" do not have boards of directors, I hear regularly that you are presented with needs to "coach up." Lucy's situation is like many: her organization (or department or service) is at odds with another, her supervisor is taking an approach that Lucy doesn't agree with, and there are high stakes and big risks for both the organization and Lucy.

Lucy has something else in common with *Nurse Leader* readers: she is smart, experienced, and savvy. She knows a lot about health care, the nursing profession, leadership, and her own role. Her story describes how she regained her power and leveraged her wisdom, rather than being undone by her feelings.

As we talked further that day, Lucy said that, several months earlier, she and the other organization's chief executive officer (CEO), Sally, agreed on a strategy to address a mutual policy concern. This strategy required coordinated communications with their respective boards, staff, and constituents. Subsequently, Lucy found out that Sally had not proceeded as agreed. Lucy's own board chair conveyed this news to Lucy, and now her chair was crafting her organization's response. Lucy was very upset that Sally didn't do what she'd promised, but she was most upset that her own chair was orchestrating her organization's reaction.

Lucy had many questions. Why did Sally suddenly become an untrustworthy colleague? Was she exhibiting fresh-from-nowhere ethical or psychological problems? Did an external force cause Sally to change directions, such as her own board or a constituent? Why hadn't Sally communicated with Lucy?

Why was Lucy's board chair addressing both the policy issue and the breach of understanding between the two CEOs? Although the chair

usually sought Lucy's opinions, the chair was not asking for her involvement this time. Why not?

Lucy was very frustrated. She thought that neither Sally nor her board chair could see the folly of their ways: Sally had violated Lucy's trust and with it, a critical interorganizational agreement. Her chair was overstepping the boundaries of her role, acting almost as if she were the CEO instead of Lucy.

Lucy felt—and sounded—absolutely righteous. She said, "Every leader knows how important it is to keep agreements with trusted colleagues. Every leader also knows when to involve the staff, especially when they are the CEOs and in the best position to address what occurred in the first place." Wasn't Lucy due the respect of her position and the opportunity to clean up this violation?

So, what is likely to happen here? "Right," savvy, and focused as she may be, Lucy risks failing in this situation. Unless she makes a deliberate choice to slow down and examine her inner state, she may amplify her intense feelings and become even more caught up in circular, self-justifying thoughts. She will be too fused with her own feelings to consciously *choose* how to present herself and her ideas. She will miss the chance to use her considerable knowledge and experience to her greatest advantage. None of these outcomes is what she wants.

What can Lucy do to interrupt her speedy downhill emotional ride? First and most important, she must be aware of and validate her feelings, and she must stop herself from letting them escalate. She can acknowledge that she has every right to feel this way, but to allow her feelings to intensify will produce results that she does not want.

Once she stops the acceleration, Lucy can ask herself these and similar questions:

- What short- and long-term organizational apprehensions does she have as a result of these events?
- What are her chief concerns about the actions of the board chair?
- Does she need more information? If so, what?
- Who else can she consult to elicit respected and different points of view about this situation?

- Who is an advisor that Lucy trusts to provide her with thoughtful feedback? In this case, Lucy's executive coach fills that role, but if she did not have a coach, who else could do this?
- If Lucy were to successfully address her biggest concerns, what would her ideal outcomes look like?
- Given those ideal outcomes, what are Lucy's goals now?
- How can she mine her experience to achieve her goals?
- What specific action steps should Lucy undertake now?
- What help or other resources does she need?
- Will anything stop Lucy from moving ahead productively? If so, what? How can she move through these barriers?

When Lucy asked herself these questions, she realized that she wanted to preserve and possibly deepen her relationship with her board chair. She remembered that she had been completely successful with handling an equally high-risk organizational crisis in the past. She recalled what she did and

identified the skills she used then and how she could use them now. As her first action step, Lucy decided to ask the chair why she was not involved, rather than discussing her feelings. Lucy mentally prepared to be as noncombative and as open as possible. She wanted to create the conditions for the board chair to speak honestly.

Lucy also recalled the considerable regard she had developed for Sally over their years of working together. She realized that she needed more information about what happened in Sally's organization that had influenced Sally so greatly.

Assuming Lucy and her chair could get onto the same page, Lucy would propose an interorganizational meeting to explore their mutual concerns, talk about their change of plans, and develop a plan for moving forward. The conversation could be CEO to CEO or a four-way meeting involving both board chairs. To monitor herself in that meeting, Lucy would keep her focus on deep listening and her respect for Sally, especially when they discussed the breached agreement.

Lucy's experience offers us a gift. By all accounts, Lucy implemented her new plan successfully: the two organizations reached accord, and she deepened her working relationship with her board chair. Lucy's story provides a high-stakes, real-life example of a leader rapidly approaching the brink of poor stewardship because of an understandable but potentially unmonitored emotional hijack. Instead, Lucy exercised discipline, sought counsel, and created concrete ways to increase her understanding and regain her composure. Her reward was significant: she reopened her access to her hard-won wisdom, experience, and skill.

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