



Catherine Robinson-Walker, MBA, MCC

Emotional Intelligence and Performance Management

Laurie is challenged with finding and keeping good managers. As a vice president of a community health system, she understands the critical importance of this leadership function. Yet, despite her other strengths, Laurie is consistently unable to groom, guide, and evoke the best from the gifted nurses who report to her.

Laurie knows that this personal challenge poses a serious threat to her future success, and she wants to tackle the problem with a fresh approach. Specifically, she wants to know how to deal with her concerns about Marita's performance. Marita is a nurse leader who Laurie admired enough to hire and relocate after an extensive search. At the time, Laurie described Marita as the perfect fit for the position.

Now it is 2 years later, and Laurie sees things very differently. She is no longer sure Marita is going to make it. Since it is Laurie's practice for direct reports to complete their own performance reviews before they meet, Laurie knows that Marita gives herself high ratings.

Laurie's view is different. Although Marita excels at the community functions that are central to her work, Laurie thinks she demonstrates below-average skill with organization and planning. In addition, Laurie believes Marita is not able to set priorities, meet deadlines, focus on details, and communicate well in writing.

Laurie knows she needs to pause before she has the meeting with Marita. If she simply proceeds, it is likely that Laurie will lose another valued employee.

Laurie's situation is familiar for many of us. We feel strongly, we are about to act, but we know we may be making a big mistake. Although Laurie has a bias toward action, in this case, she stopped herself. She did not simply react to her strong negative feelings. Instead, she sought outside help and she managed a significant change within herself. As a result, she moved from nearly firing Marita to getting her point across *and* becoming genuinely engaged with Marita's view of her work.

What happened? How did Laurie make such a dramatic shift? First and most important, she was willing to get outside of her own head by

seeking counsel from someone who would respect and also challenge her thinking. Second, Laurie was willing to redirect her focus; she stopped thinking so much about Marita and started thinking more about herself. By exploring what was going on within herself, Laurie learned that:

- She had not considered how she was contributing or not contributing to Marita's work and success.
- She was repeating a pattern she had played out with other direct reports many times.
- She was experiencing the same strong negative judgments she felt when other staff leaders did not have these strengths.

Luckily, Laurie was able to see the patterns that emerged. She wanted to know why she ended up in the same conversation with so many of her direct reports. She also wanted to learn how her performance management challenges related to emotional intelligence. Most important, she wanted to know what to do with what she learned.

The most telling piece of information is that consistently Laurie discovers the same shortcomings in many of the managers who report to her. Without fail, she becomes upset when others do not or cannot excel with organization, detail, and planning. An equally compelling piece of information is that these perceived shortcomings in others are exceptional strengths for Laurie. She believes that her own outstanding abilities in these areas provide her with a commanding sense of control.

However, by repeatedly finding fault with these skills in others, Laurie may be exhibiting, over and over, an excessive need for control. As Laurie considered this possibility, she said that she has been called overly controlling for years. She volunteered that this is probably driven by old messages and her fear of failure on the job.

The literature on emotional intelligence (EI) tells us that such fear can be propelled by our hard-wired human need to stay emotionally safe. As Laurie considered how this reality applied to her, she grew close to the heart of her challenge: how could she manage her employee's performance in an emotionally intelligent way? What

would that look like in the meeting with Marita?

From an EI vantage point, Laurie's real work is to become aware of her own need for emotional safety and

- *Notice how it can drive and at times sabotage her intentions and her behavior, especially if it remains unconscious*
- *Actively manage her quest for safety in ways that promote rather than inhibit productive relationships with others*

So, how does she do this? First Laurie considered the cost of letting her needs for control and safety overwhelm her other thoughts and feelings. She realized that her unwitting wish had closed off access to her appreciation of Marita's strengths. For example, although she would allude to Marita's accomplishments in passing, Laurie usually followed such recognition with the word *but*. Laurie learned that this word effectively cancels out any previous acknowledgment of Marita's strong points.

Laurie's need for control and safety also closed off her curiosity about Marita's vision for herself in the position. Before pausing to examine her own internal state, it did not even occur to Laurie to ask about Marita's view of the future: what did Marita want to achieve for the community she served? What did she want to achieve for their organization? What did she want to achieve for herself?

When Laurie explored her feelings, she began to appreciate again why she hired Marita in the first place. Laurie's honest reflection paid a valuable dividend: she made a significant emotional shift that allowed her to have an entirely different dialogue with Marita. She led from a position of genuine curiosity and appreciation instead of negative judgment. After their meeting, Laurie reported that:

1. She started the conversation by recognizing Marita's accomplishments and asking about Marita's vision for her position and for herself.
2. She was curious about Marita's future goals; what did she really want to achieve in her professional life?
3. She focused on actively listening to Marita's aspirations.

4. Together, they spent most of the meeting aligning Marita's ambitions with the overall vision for the health system.
5. As the conversation flowed, Laurie made suggestions that supported Marita's growth. At the same time, Laurie made valid points about the skills she wanted Marita to strengthen (organization, follow through, etc.). She placed her expectations in the context of Marita's vision, the organization's goals, and what Marita needed to work on to be successful.
6. Laurie sensed that Marita fully listened and took in each of her requests.
7. Laurie kept tabs on her own feelings. She observed herself listening with an open mind and an open heart. As she did this, Laurie believed that Marita's engagement in the conversation grew stronger. In turn, Laurie's own enthusiasm grew, too. As they talked together, Laurie re-engaged her own vision for their work on behalf of their community and its health. She became reinvigorated with her original excitement about what they could achieve together.

In the end, both Laurie and Marita said they were very satisfied with the discussion. In fact, Laurie was so energized that she remains enthusiastic about Marita's work to this day.

Catherine Robinson-Walker, MBC, MCC, is president of The Leadership Studio®, a national firm that provides coaching and leader-as-coach training to nurse leaders and nurse managers and their teams. She is an experienced healthcare leader and a master certified coach. She can be reached at cathy@leadershipstudio.com.

1541-4612/2010/ \$ See front matter
Copyright 2010 by Mosby Inc.
All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.mnl/2010.05.003