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Releasing the Leader Within

Imagine that you are a seasoned nurse leader and that you are stuck. You are bright and accomplished, but you are quite unhappy in your new job. You regularly receive calls from executive recruiters, so you know there is a good position for you elsewhere. After weeks of feeling unsure about your direction, you decide to seek executive coaching to sort out your thoughts.

In your early conversations with your coach, you complain that you are bored with your work and that you've had this and similar roles for 2 decades. You also say that your salary is lower than you could get somewhere else. In addition, you have problems with your fellow leaders. You feel they are not as bright as you, and there is dissonance within your team because they don't "get" you.

If there have been times when you are not authentically committed to your work, perhaps you can identify with Lorraine's story. It is normal for talented human beings to fall into periods of disenchantment. What is not normal is to stay in these periods—to essentially take up residence in negative emotions and create more and better reasons to remain there, even though it is not healthy or productive.

When we find ourselves feeling off kilter, it is up to us to do what it takes to reconnect with a positive way of being in the professional world. We must make an effort to understand what is not working in our situation or ourselves, and we must be willing to change it. Contrary to what our first instincts may tell us, blaming others is usually not the right answer.

As Lorraine discovered, remaining negative can have a significant impact on our health, our work, and those around us. When she talked things through with her coach, she shared her conviction that "nobody at work knows how I feel," but she soon realized that this was not true; in fact, her disaffection was leaking in ways that were troubling and even dangerous. For example, when someone cut her off in traffic, Lorraine said she would "show them" by gunning the gas pedal to get back in front of the offender. Similarly, when she grew impatient with others on the job, she simply talked a lot or talked over people.

Although she was embarrassed to admit these things, Lorraine said she was unable to stop herself from doing them. Even though she didn't like what she was seeing in herself, she had the courage to continue her exploration. Lorraine eventually came to a critical realization: her lack of engagement with the job she was hired to do was *her* problem. She began to deeply understand that she was doing a disservice to her organization, the exemplary leader who hired her, and herself.

This new awareness led Lorraine to a new question: what if she decided to stay right where she was? Even if she were to leave the job eventually, what if she refocused now and dedicated herself to doing the job she was hired to do—not halfway and not while simultaneously looking for another position? What if she really committed to doing *this* job as well as she could?

This is exactly what Lorraine did. This small moment became a major turning point in her evolution as a leader. The decision to fully commit to her work and this job grounded her, but it was just one of several actions that led Lorraine to greater success as a leader. Here are the others:

- Lorraine actively observed herself at work. She also solicited respected others' points of view about her strengths and challenges. She asked for feedback about the impact she had on people and how she contributed to dissonance with her colleagues when it occurred.
- Lorraine was willing to take real risks so she could learn. She took an emotional intelligence assessment that revealed her difficulty with allowing others to have their share of the credit. She learned that talking too much and providing information in every possible form were bids to elicit praise such as "you're right," "you're great," and, essentially, "we love you." She saw what was beneath her behavior: a need to feel superior to and admired by others to feel valuable and safe.
- She was willing to be completely honest with herself. She learned that hostile behaviors toward others were really strategies to self-soothe, strategies to make her

feel better in the moment, even though she was sabotaging her relationships in the long run.

- She was willing to let go of old stories and ways of being. She realized that she had developed and needed many of these coping mechanisms when she was growing up. Many years ago, she had lived in an environment in which she felt she had to be on top to survive. While that may have been true then, it was not true now.
- She was willing to be uncomfortable and to practice new behaviors, even though there was no guarantee of success. She tried listening more than speaking, and she did not habitually fill empty spaces with needless conversation. She showed empathy and compassion more than hostility when others were having difficulty. She

felt calm and conveyed a sense of peace. She was willing to be humble and admit it when she did not have the answers.

Lorraine made a remarkable shift by simply changing her mind and having the courage to act differently. She focused on and committed to a deeper definition of what it means to go to work. After doing this, she said that working was much more enjoyable and that her colleagues noticed big and small differences in her behavior. They said she showed much more trust and candor in her interactions with them, and eventually, by everyone's account, she achieved a huge win for her organization.

Lorraine's courage illustrates the importance of owning and addressing our dissatisfactions. Lorraine feels her newfound and sweet success would not have been possible if the "old

Lorraine" was still in charge.

Fortunately, she grew tired of repeating old patterns and living in an old story. Now, instead of simply seeking a new job, she knows that the way she's always approached being out of sorts is not the best choice. Lorraine was able to change and to shed her old skin, knowing it had served her in the past when she had to compete and to win in order to survive.

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