

DIFFICULT BOSSES: TAMING THE DRAGON LADY WITH COURAGE AND COMPASSION

Though the journey through conflict may seem perilous, we each have available to us a power to ease our way. This power quells anger, builds bridges of understanding, and wins us a hearing with even the most stubborn person. It is freely accessible to us and requires only that we let go of the need to be right (although some might find this a steep price). This greatly underused power is that of listening.

The Joy of Conflict Resolution

With conflict comes a sense of being disrespected, attacked or threatened in some way. We feel like the innocent victim (or perhaps the righteous hero, defending ourselves or others) and view our adversary as the villain of our story. I call this the “Drama Triangle of Conflict” – a concept that helps us understand ourselves and our role in perpetuating disputes. It also reminds us that there is always another side to the story and that our nemesis is caught up in a similar experience. Except in *their* story, *they* feel victimized or threatened and view us as the villain. Everyone is the hero in their own story.

Most people I teach accept this in theory, but balk when asked to apply the concept to their own situation. They inevitably ask “But what if they *are* a villain?”, and offer the supporting argument that “Everyone in the department thinks they’re a jerk”. This perspective usually strikes a chord with others in the class, who can’t wait to share their own “boss from hell” stories. The subsequent venting offers temporary consolation, which soon gives way to a pall of hopelessness. Because their nemesis is in a position of power, people fear they will be punished if they speak up – either immediately by a cutting retort or more subtly by receiving less desirable work assignments or poor performance reviews.

This is the story of a woman who found herself trapped in just such a situation – and did something about it. Laura (we’ll call her) worked in health care under the iron-fisted supervision of Rita (not her real name, either). Rita was referred to by her staff as “the dragon lady” (but only in her absence, of course). Like most areas in health care, “The Unit” had been subjected to more than its share of change – technology, downsizing and an assortment of dreaded “corporate initiatives”. With each change, stress built and Rita became more distant and caustic. She seldom visited “The Unit” and communicated only, it seemed, to deliver bad news or criticism. Despite posters and “value statements” to the contrary, the real organizational culture discouraged direct communication and staff talked more *about* “the dragon lady” than *to* her. Tension mounted.

Laura was no different than her co-workers as she recoiled from Rita’s abrasive manner. She would often bring her frustrations home and unload them on her husband. He would dutifully listen as Laura recounted the injustices of the day and nod in sympathy with her plight. One evening, however, he offered a comment that would change Laura’s thinking – and her world. “Your dragon lady sounds like someone who really needs a friend,” he mused. Laura immediately scoffed at such an absurd notion and accused him of “taking that woman’s side.” But when the initial rush of defensiveness subsided, Laura was left with a nagging thought, “what must it be like for Rita - working in a thankless pressure-cooker with a team that despises her?” She decided to find out.

The next day, despite her trepidation, Laura approached Rita. The conversation began awkwardly. “What do you want?”, Rita snapped. Laura took a deep breath and remained resolute. “Just wondered how things are going for you? You have an awful lot on your plate these days.” Rita surveyed Laura with a blend of suspicion and surprise, then relaxed ever so little. “It’s a struggle. Somebody’s always got a problem with something. That’s the only time I hear from people.” Laura nodded with a sympathetic smile. “Hang in there. We’ll make it through somehow.”

This modest conversation evolved over the next few months into weekly coffee breaks and even the odd lunch. Laura found that she didn’t talk much during her time with Rita. Usually, she simply listened as Rita talked about the pressures of her position and the frustration of being tasked to do so much with diminishing resources. Occasionally, Laura would offer her perspective, or even recommend that Rita solicit input from staff members on challenging issues.

Laura’s newfound friendship with Rita did not sit well with some of Laura’s co-workers, a few of whom even accused her of “consorting with the enemy”. Laura would simply smile and gently remind them that there was always more to a situation than meets the eye. She continued to chat with her co-workers, but refused to be caught up in the venting sessions directed at Rita.

When Christmas approached, Laura was surprised when Rita handed her a present. Inside was a leather bound edition of one of her favourite books. When Laura protested that the gift was both unnecessary and too expensive, Rita looked at her with a rare smile and said. “If you knew how much your friendship has meant to me these past months, you wouldn’t say that. Thank you.” A tear rolled down the “dragon lady’s” cheek.

The impact of Laura’s kindness extended far beyond Rita. Once her co-workers got over their initial judgements of Laura’s “fraternization”, they began to notice a change in Rita. Rita began to ask them for their opinions, offer occasional compliments and, to their surprise, actually smiled. For the first time in years, “The Unit” felt like a team – supporting each to manage the required changes and cope with the stress.

What did Laura do to have such a powerful, positive impact on such a toxic work environment?

Firstly, she exhibited a hero’s courage. Not the courage we normally associate with confronting and vanquishing an adversary, but the courage to examine her judgements and change her perspective. She also showed the courage to stay true to her beliefs when belittled by her co-workers for showing kindness to a person they saw as the enemy.

Secondly, she saw that beneath Rita’s crusty exterior was someone in pain – someone who truly “needed a friend”. She replaced her judgement with curiosity and demonstrated her compassion by listening. And without the need to cast Rita as the villain in this workplace drama, Laura freed herself from the role of the victim. A new story was born – one without victims or villains.

Laura’s kindness sparked a chain of events that improved the atmosphere of the entire department. Laura was truly “being the change she would see in the world.”

For those of you who feel trapped by your own workplace drama and frustrated with your own “dragon lady”, Laura’s story provides both hope and a challenge. Hope springs from the power of compassion to dramatically improve relationships. The challenge lies in letting go of the need to be right and in seeing the humanity in those you would view as your enemy. In meeting that challenge by listening with compassion, Laura proved that “the best way to defeat an enemy is to make them a friend.”