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Don't Be Dissed

In the vernacular of street language, being dissed is justification for crimes of violence and retribution. Dissed is an acronym for disrespectful or disrespected. Apparently, it is manifested in a number of ways ranging from what a person says to as simple an act as a disdainful look. In street language, dissing is subject to a whole lot of interpretations. Regardless of what form it takes, the consequences are almost always the same: someone gets hurt. Sitting around the television set at night listening to the news, most of us are pretty critical of other human beings who would take a life over such a trivial event. But don't be so quick to judge these random acts of violence. Take the time to study them and you might learn a few lessons about how our own more civilized contemporaries are dissing to destroy lives also.

Granted, most of us do not discharge firearms against people who treat us with a lack of respect, but we have other ways of getting even. Sometimes it consists of becoming professional enemies, even seeking the ouster of another person from a job. Sometimes it takes the form of constant conflict which destroys our ability to use our time effectively. Oh yes, there are many ways to harm a person other than physical violence.

In the case of our profession, there are at least four forms of dissing that can get us into a lot of trouble. They are disrespect, disloyalty, dishonesty, and dissatisfaction. Each of these dissings is subject to a great deal of interpretation. Each can be demonstrated in at least three directions, upward to our bosses, downward to our employees, and sideways to our friends and peers. For purposes of this column, I would also like to note that all of these are forms of behavior that are synergistic. If they are displayed towards another person, they are often reflected back towards ourselves with increased intensity.

Therefore, you have two situations. The first is you can be the initiator of these behaviors and therefore be responsible for the outcomes. The second is you can be the recipient of such behaviors and be responsible for the reactions. No matter what, you are the key. The situation regarding dissing can only get out of hand if you allow it to. If you want to start something, you can. If you want to end something, you can. But both take a conscious effort on your own part.

Let's deal with dishing it out first. In my experience, there are a whole lot of people who are experts at dishing it out, but real amateurs at dealing with the response. Demonstrations of disrespect for others are a real easy thing to do. All you have to do is to place yourself in a position of thinking that you are more important than the other person and voila: disrespect. Any time that you are feeling superior to another individual or smug about your position of superiority, you are on the verge of disrespect. You might even be verbally friendly towards another individual, but actions speak louder than words.



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Disrespect is best defined as a relationship between how a person wants to be treated and how we actually treat them.

One individual I observed had a boss that he did not think deserved any respect. He actively spoke against the person in terms of him being stupid, incompetent, and out of touch. He was real careful to never say these things in front of the boss, but was not too cautious otherwise. Then there came time for a reorganization of the agency. The person who made such remarks was shocked to find out that he was out. The city manager, with whom I'd had a lot of other interaction, told me that the person was very easy to get rid of, because he was stupid, incompetent, and out of touch. Apparently, that individual never knew that every time he spoke disrespectfully about the boss, the message was being delivered right back to that person. The individual never seemed to notice that no one else ever shared his opinions of the boss and jumped on the bandwagon.

Disloyalty is a situation where you think that your fate is not linked to another's fate and therefore you don't care what happens to them. It's an attitude of every person for themselves. It is frequently demonstrated in situations where someone is given an opportunity to support someone else and deliberately chooses not to do so. We take a metaphorical one step backwards and try to avoid being associated with someone who is experiencing difficulty. Disloyalty is a very painful experience when it is inflicted upon you. Those who see it occurring to themselves do not understand that in some cases it is occurring because they have failed to be loyal to the institution or the organization themselves.

Disloyalty is easy to demonstrate. All you have to do is to remain silent when someone else is suffering and you are engaged in being disloyal to that individual.

One friend of mine told me of his dismay when his entire staff turned his back on him as he faced a vote of no confidence. They didn't do anything to him, they simply didn't do anything. They did not help him. He felt hopelessly abandoned at the time. Disloyalty is, to some people, a thought process much more than it is an act. Disloyalty is as frequently an act of cowardice as it is an act of defiance. I believe that it can be both at different times. People do shift loyalties and disloyalties. There can be an expression of a person's devotion to different causes or to different people, and the more often that loyalty is given or taken away, the less likely it can ever be counted on in the future.

You can demonstrate disloyalty very simply by always taking care of number one. If you take care of yourself and forget all others, chances are you're going to be disloyal. If you can't be trusted to be there when you are needed, then you are not loyal to anyone or anything.

The next form of dissing is a serious problem if you demonstrate it. It's called dishonesty. A simple definition: deliberate misuse or elimination of the truth from relationships. It consists of lying, deceit,



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and failure to tell the truth under essential conditions. Dishonest people are basically those that know what the truth is, but deliberately choose to color the facts in order to achieve a separate agenda.

I hesitate to identify any specific examples of dishonesty under the context of this column for fear that it could be used to point a finger at someone. Even if this is done inadvertently, I believe it is a negative impact on our profession. Much more important than that is the question of whether or not you have seen it demonstrated yourself. Has something ever been told to you that you later found out was a lie? Have you ever had something stolen from you that you later discovered who took it? Dishonesty is a selfish act. When a person is being dishonest, basically they're protecting their own interests at the expense of everyone else and proceeding as if the truth were irrelevant.

Dissatisfaction is an expression that something does not or cannot meet our own expectations. It's another way of dissing. Dissatisfaction is expressed as constant complaining that an organization or another person's performance is deliberately inadequate and therefore you are personally displeased. Expressions of dissatisfaction are almost personalized by the use of personal pronouns. "You are not doing a good job for me." "I expect more out of you." "What is wrong with you?"

When you express dissatisfaction towards another coupled with the use of personal pronouns, you keep the person on the defense. The only way that they can respond is to try to prove to you that you are wrong. It is a no-win relationship. This is because your original assessment of being dissatisfied will never be overcome by an explanation. It can only be overcome by a change in behavior which conforms with your expectations.

Well, these are the ways that you can diss other people. You can demonstrate all four in different ways at different times to different people. For example, you can disrespect your employees, be disloyal to your boss, be dishonest with your peers, and be dissatisfied with your job. Don't be surprised if you eventually end up getting discharged.

The corollary to all of these is the fact that people can and will demonstrate these behaviors back towards you if you demonstrate them. What are you going to do about it? If, as stated before, a person responds in kind, there will be dissension. If you are powerful enough, you may prevail. But if you are not, you can look for an escalation of the dispute.

The alternative strategy is this. First off, set the record at the outset that you do not demonstrate these traits yourself. Always take the high road by never engaging people in opportunities for them to use your own behavior against you. Accidental or otherwise, if you demonstrate any of the former definitions of activity, they can justify their reaction by merely reflecting your behavior.



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Secondarily, always treat the act of dissing as a deficiency on the part of the other person and not a personal attack upon yourself. Just because someone treats you disrespectfully doesn't mean that you do not deserve respect. It may mean that the other person has a problem with you, but it doesn't mean that what you have done is necessarily wrong.

Thirdly, have the courage to have a dialogue with the person in private. Sitting down to determine, if you can, why the person is exhibiting a particular behavior that is disrespectful towards you. Never try to defend yourself in public. All this does is set up debate. It only contributes to the other person's perception that they are winning. If you have examples of the traits we have discussed, you have a right to ask from the other person why they are doing what they are doing.

I once had a staff officer who did not like my management style nor did he concur with the direction I was taking the department. We both attended a professional meeting one day where he roundly criticized me for a specific program. Basically, he misrepresented the facts (dishonesty) and in the summary remarks he more or less stated that he was refusing to do the job anyway. Unfortunately, he did not consider the fact that the group he was talking to had all been involved in developing the basic concept that I was advocating. Prior to my becoming a chief, he had never attended one of these meetings and was assuming that everybody else was going to agree with him. He was only there because I had instructed him to attend to become part of the network. The telephone lines were almost overwhelmed by the number of calls I received after the event. Upon his return back to the department I asked him to join me in the office. After getting both of us a cup of coffee, I told him that I had a great number of phone calls about what he had stated in the meeting. I did not repeat any one of the phrases that was used back to me. I merely asked him if he would like to discuss with me his feelings that resulted in his being compelled to make these statements in a public manner.

Initially, he was reluctant to even speak. His reaction was if I wanted to discipline him, go right ahead; he would fight it. I indicated that I had no desire to discipline him, but I was very interested in learning why he feels so strongly about my direction to the department so that we could find out if there were any common areas of agreement.

It finally came out. He told me, rather bluntly, that as far as he was concerned I was taking his job. He had been promised the fire chief job by several members of the council in the past and felt betrayed by the city manager when he appointed me. I could understand that feeling. Not only could I understand it but I could almost feel it. He continued on. He had tried to create programs of his own in the past and my predecessor had dismissed his efforts as being meaningless and irrelevant. He felt the system had abused him and he wanted to harm us. After this discussion, there were a series of events that reversed the phenomenon. Of course, there was a lot more to the story. But let me summarize. When he got done that day I told the person there were three things I respected. People who had the courage of their own convictions, people who could express themselves without losing their temper, and people who



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told me the truth even if it hurt. We agreed right at that meeting that he could tell me anything he disagreed with as long as I was the first person that he told if it was my actions. I also told him I felt that it was my responsibility to explain to him that no matter what I was trying to do I owed him an understanding before anybody else in the organization. We further went on to agree that no matter what was said behind closed doors, it was always between us and not anyone else.

Years later I was pleased to have the chance to see this same staff officer become a fire chief in another community. In the years in between we had some very interesting conversations. But never again did I ever receive phone calls about his expressing disrespect to me publicly.

Lastly, I know that the most difficult strategy to sustain is to maintain your dignity when all this is going on. But to paraphrase Winston Churchill, never, never, never believe that you can win a spraying contest with a skunk. No matter what happens when people treat you with disrespect, no matter how disloyal they become, even if they are totally dishonest, even when they try to cheat and destroy you, don't ever contemplate the same tactics in return.

Remain above the mud and muck. Do everything you can to preserve your sense of fairness. Do not reward them in terms of successes but do not penalize individuals who are honest with you even when it hurts. Of course, there's a point in time in which individuals will engage in behaviors that could be considered illegal. Then you need to take action. But just because someone ticks you off doesn't mean that you can discipline them.

I know that these strategies can work because I've seen them work. In my own career, I've experienced city council recall elections, many major policy controversies, and a threat by taxpayers to put term limits on department heads, including the fire chief. I have seen fire chief's experience votes of no confidence. I've seen fire chiefs lose jobs overnight. I've seen careers destroyed when these behaviors have escalated beyond legitimate control. All of these events are a sort of civilized version of drive-by shootings. They are potential opportunities for disaster. If the simple act of dissing a person can result in gunfire on the street corner, the act of dissing others in an organizational setting can result in harm too. Develop a strategy to deal with these behaviors and instead of dispute and disgust, you may experience the success of personal achievement.

Your choice!!