Leadership Development

The Power of "I"

We all want to achieve our goals, but unfortunately others sometimes seem to block us, making it challenging to meet deadlines, complete projects, or meet our personal needs.

> "I would have completed the project, but Accounting didn't have the information I needed. THEY are responsible."

But making someone else responsible for not meeting our goals does more. When we allow THEM to be responsible for our success, we give up power, abandon the search for new solutions, and experience more anxiety. If we feel the pain of a problem, we must be the solution.

Finding that solution is a 3-step process:
1. Ask the following questions about the situation:
   - What is occurring?
   - What is the preferred outcome?
   - Who can fix this?
2. Reframe the situation, but replace all third-person references (he/she/they) with first-person pronouns (I/we).
3. Re-examine the situation: what can this *I* do to change what's happening, to reach the preferred outcome, to fix the problem? This shift in perspective opens the door to a wide range of experiments and reclaim our power.

The following true story shows these steps in action:

> *"Adam" is young and ambitious. He is 30 and has worked for a well-known tech company for a couple of years as an individual contributor. However, Adam's peers are moving into the first level of people management without him.*
>
> *Adam believes he's stuck because:*
> - *His boss is busy and doesn't take time to mentor him.*
> - *His India-based team has missed deadlines.*
> - *Peers and colleagues continually ask Adam to do the work they should be doing.*
>
> *Despite these obstacles, Adam believes he would get a promotion if "they" would change:*
> - *If Adam's boss would do his job by providing advice and mentoring him*

- *If the India-based team would do their jobs and meet project deadlines*
- *If people would read Adam's emails and do the work themselves*

We have all been Adam. Our lives would be so much easier if others would change! But others don't change—especially for us. After all, we can hardly influence ourselves to make changes.

During our first coaching session, I asked Adam if he was ready to accept a big challenge:

"You missed your deadline because the folks in India failed to meet their deadlines, right?" I asked Adam.

"Yes, they kept pushing things back. But, it's not my fault the project was delayed," Adam confirmed.

"What would be an ideal outcome?"

"They should meet their deadlines," he responded quickly.

"And who can fix this problem?"

"They can!"

I challenged Adam to reframe the situation. Instead of using third-person pronouns—they, them, etc.—he should use first-person pronouns.

Adam was confused. He was convinced that he hadn't messed up. The team in India had messed up! It was their fault. I asked Adam to describe the situation again, starting with "I." At this point, Adam couldn't even begin to communicate the problem.

Next, I offered him an example: "I missed my deadline because I didn't know how to work with the India team effectively."

This was a massive shift in thinking for Adam, but it also helped him to take ownership over what he could control. By focusing on how he could work more effectively with his team, he was able to explore far more options and new ways to interact with the team. He was no longer abdicating the search for a solution to others.

While we may be more comfortable blaming THEM for our problems, we also leave ourselves without the ability to change the outcome. By focusing on the power of *I*, we open the door to a wide range of experiments and reclaim our power.