

*It's harder to empathize with those who appear to possess more power, status, or resources.*

—MARSHALL B. ROSENBERG, PhD

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## *Executive Bully*



I was in a meeting with Patty, a manager from a different department than mine. I didn't know her well, but she seemed dynamic and innovative. I began to explain some project limitations I was worried about. As I shared my perspective from a technical point of view, Patty's responses became louder and more pointed. She seemed adamant and angry, as if my sharing of information came across as insubordination. I tried to express my intention to collaborate on a solution, but she kept stopping me mid-sentence, saying things like "You need to do this" or "No excuses" or "Just make it work." Finally, I simply said, "Yes," and left the office quickly.

I felt surprised and shaken, especially since what had triggered her seemed neutral to me. The story in my head about Patty started taking shape. She was irritable and erratic. I soon discovered I wasn't the only one who felt this way. Many people who worked closely with Patty felt similarly. She had a reputation for being a bully and for embodying all the qualities you *don't* want in a manager.

After that meeting, I walked on eggshells around Patty. I tried to dismiss and condemn her, but that didn't make my internal

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state any better. So I actively tried to explore my own vulnerability related to her. This was hard because my self-judgments were that I was weak and oversensitive. I decided to be honest with myself, realizing that I felt pain because I cared.

I could also see that I deeply wanted peace with her (as I do with all people). I knew a peaceful relationship might not be possible, but once I developed respect and compassion for the part of me that wanted a good relationship with her, I had more tolerance for the fact that it wasn't entirely within my control. After working on it for months, I got to the point where I felt at ease in Patty's presence. Meanwhile, colleagues complained about how difficult Patty was and how she was destroying the company. She was becoming "The Cause of All That Is Wrong" according to the office narrative. I thought the stories oversimplified the situation and left out other dynamics at play.

Shortly thereafter, I discovered that Patty had emailed her staff. "I've heard rumors that I'm difficult to work with. I've heard people say I've done things that were hard on them, but no one has ever confronted me about it. I can't address something that I don't know about."

I noticed a strong impulse to talk to her. It felt like a natural continuation of all the inner work I had done. This was an opportunity to heal the company I cared about. But I also I wondered if I was delusional. *Would it matter? Could I really make a difference?*

I spoke about it with a coworker, Sheila. After I mentioned what I was considering, she responded, "This is scary because you don't know what will happen. You might become her number one enemy. On the other hand, the reason we make progress in the world is because of people willing to do scary things out of faith and hope."

Sheila continued to paint the larger context of what it can take to change the world or our small piece of it. As she spoke, my focus shifted from feeling delusional about facilitating change

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in our organization to asking whether I had the courage to try.

The next day, a golden opportunity came. Patty approached me after a meeting and said, “I have a feeling that I’ve hurt you. If there is anything I’ve done, I’d love it if you could talk to me about it.” It was a direct request. It felt sincere and vulnerable. I wanted to be savvy about the fact that I was about to give difficult feedback to someone higher up, so with the support of a neutral witness, we agreed to chat.

I began by saying, “I want to explain why I agreed to meet with you. I was touched by your desire to check in and hear me out.” I paused and took a breath. “I want to acknowledge that this meeting is scary for me because you have more power in this organization than I do. But I sense your sincerity. If I can help you understand some aspect of this dynamic so that you can improve yourself or your relationships, that is very meaningful to me. I believe very firmly in the innate goodness of every human being and the possibility of change.”

“This is very good to hear. Did I do something to offend you?” Patty asked.

With a deep breath, I said, “Every human being is a mixture of positive and negative qualities and sometimes we’re not aware of the impact we can have on each other. A few months ago, during a meeting about a project, we had a conversation. This is what I remember of it . . .” I went on to tell her what I remembered her saying. I explained how her responses seemed to use a lot more force than what seemed necessary for the situation.

“I don’t remember any of this at all,” she replied. “I’m sorry I said something that hurt you.”

I thought about a conversation I’d had with my therapist in which she’d told me it’s common for bullies to be out of touch with the ways they affect people around them. In light of that, her response was understandable. I offered her some empathy.

“I imagine it’s painful to hear that you had a negative impact,” I guessed.

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“I don’t understand why other people have talked behind my back. Why didn’t you approach me earlier?” asked Patty.

Rather than answer directly, I chose to guess at what was really behind the question. “Are you wishing you’d had a chance to address these situations instead of hearing them indirectly?”

“Yes!” she exclaimed.

“It sounds like you wish people were more considerate of your feelings?”

“Yes. This has been really hard on me,” she said, taking a deep breath.

I continued my empathy guesses. “I appreciate you for listening and taking this in. It’s not easy to hear difficult things about yourself.”

“Yes, this is surprising but helpful,” Patty replied.

Then I switched gears, saying, “This incident was really hard on me, and it took me a while to get over it. I didn’t consider talking to you about it because your actions seemed so erratic and severe. I didn’t trust your ability to be caring. I’m not telling you this to make you feel bad, but to help you understand it had an effect. I avoided you, and it took a lot of work on myself to get to the point where I felt okay in your presence.”

“Wow, a lot of work on yourself? I’m so sorry.” The sadness and surprise on Patty’s face was evident.

“Yes. I can see that you’re really sad about what I experienced with you. It helps me feel better,” I said.

“I’m glad.” She seemed touched.

“And I also take responsibility for the fact that no one can ever know for sure what someone’s intention is . . .”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “Sometimes people are too sensitive.”

“Yes, some people would have taken it better than I did and some would have taken it worse. But listen, your actions during our meeting were egregious. I understand that you don’t remember this particular incident between us, but there are others who have found communicating with you difficult.”

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This was a tender and delicate line. I didn't want her to beat herself up, but I wanted her to face up to the effect she had on me and others in the organization who didn't have the courage to speak.

She seemed to be taking it in.

I went on: "I completely agree there's an element of personal responsibility in any dynamic, but it's also true we affect each other. I imagine there are some people in your life who have influenced you in a positive way, maybe even inspired you. True?" I asked.

She nodded.

"And some people have negatively influenced you. How we interact with people encourages them to bring out their best or their worst. Am I making sense?"

"Yes," she replied.

"I want you to shine at your job. I can see that you want good relationships with the people you work with. I hope if you understand my experience, it will help you calibrate how you act and be more successful."

"I can tell that you care, and I appreciate this," she said.

At the end of our conversation, Patty let me know how much she valued my frankness. I realized later that the courage to speak with her grew out of the same vulnerability that I had held so many self-judgments about. The part of myself that Patty hurt was also the part that cared. The part that cared enabled me to open up to her and see her good qualities, despite her challenging behavior. I could say difficult things with love and respect.

In the months that followed, I heard through the rumor mill that Patty reigned in her temper considerably. I was sad, however, that she seemed muted compared to her old self. I hope in time, she learned how to speak kindly and respectfully while preserving her authenticity and passion. I regret that I didn't offer more empathy and support, but I also appreciated how I showed up, considering all I was juggling at the time: my aspirations and

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tenderness, the scope of my communication skills, her discomfort, and my career.

All in all, I'm pleased with the progress we made that day, and all the work that went into it.

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