

"Ask the Leadership Consultant" *

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Question:

"I know that many times I have to remind employees to put principles above personalities. That we are here to work on a project and the fact that you may dislike a co worker should not come into play.

But sometimes that is easier said than done. How do you deal with employees who want to have a confrontation instead of a conversation. Unfortunately, dismissing one or removing one from the team is not an option."

Answer: Primarily, never forget that we lead people! We don't lead organizations... but *people*. The word "organization" is a created term to refer to a group of *individual* people who have a shared interest or purpose. We may work for an organization, or serve an organization, but ultimately it is *people* we are leading. The reason I mention this is that many authors and consultants speak of rebuilding or changing organizations as if they are dealing with a single individual. In truth, if we are interested in growing or changing an organization, we must change the *people*, one-by-one, who *collectively* are the organization.

I am a firm believer in the principle of "cause and effect." This problem you describe exists because our *historical* business culture rewarded competition within the workplace environment. People were *rewarded* and promoted for making their co-workers look inept and inferior to them. The people who traditionally got ahead were the "politicians" who worked hard to diminish the value of everyone else in order to make themselves look loyal and valuable to the organization. Confrontation was viewed as an admirable trait that showed everyone who was "*in-charge*" and was potential managerial or *executive* material.

When this kind of a culture exists, a large part of everyone's positive mental and emotional resources are wasted playing "got-ya" in an effort to allow the egos of some to make themselves appear superior to others. This problem has been modeled in government, business, and many religious organizations for hundreds of years.

Culture is never an easy thing to change. It takes time, energy and persistence. But, here are some things you can do.

1. Lead by example. Don't participate or play the game of "got-ya." When this is done in your presence, let it be known by your look and gestures that you are not impressed by this kind of self-absorbed behavior. Whatever you do... don't laugh at putdowns, or do anything that openly or even subtly encourages this kind of behavior. If it continues...

2. When an individual does this in a group, or to you personally, say with a smile on your face, “Greg, this kind of an attitude is not important or relevant. The question we should be addressing is *what* is wrong, not focusing on who is wrong.”

If the behavior continues make statements like, “This approach of making everything *personal* is not helpful to our team. I would appreciate it if we could focus on genuine problems and not the people you differ with. If it continues...

3. You need to address this issue “one-on-one.” No one ever said that leadership is easy. Sometimes you must address issues *head-on*, and for the sake of the organization you need to be frank and pointed. Let the person know that their behavior is not professional, mature or productive in the workplace. To see how to [correct a co-worker](#) effectively read this leadership tip.

4. If it continues... there are a number of options you need to consider. Is there another supervisor or executive who can also approach this individual with a *similar message* to reinforce what you said? Are the individual’s contributions so *important* that everyone else can endure his or her behavior? Is the behavior so divisive and harmful to productivity that the person needs to be employed elsewhere? If you get to this point, these are serious questions that must be answered.

If you are a manager or supervisor never... ever... promote a person who demonstrates this kind of behavior. If you do, it sends a *loud message* throughout the organization that being a jerk who criticizes and confronts everyone else is what it takes to get ahead in this company. Be assured of this fact. You will inadvertently reinforce a culture of negativity and politics in the organization and this is destructive. If the person is extremely talented and otherwise promotable, let them know that it is this trait that is holding them back. Document it on their annual review.

If you address this problem with skill, patience and dignity you may help that person to see how harmful their behavior really is. The truth is they are very insecure and lack a real sense of self-worth! They mask this to the world by confrontational behavior. You may help this individual grow to another level and at least modify their attitude and behavior. But remember that *you* can’t change their behavior... you can only point out to them how they come across and hurt others. Only they can change themselves.

If you have a challenging question you would like our consultant to discuss, please email your question [here](#). We will be happy to keep your question anonymously.

*** The advice and counsel offered by the consultant is based on the limited information provided by the questioner. No two situations are exactly the same, and the consultant makes every effort to provide helpful and educational counsel based on the information supplied.**

About the author:

Greg has an extensive thirty-five years experience in public speaking and has spoken to hundreds of audiences worldwide. Greg has a Master of Arts degree in Leadership from Bellevue University, where he also has served as an adjunct professor teaching courses in business management and leadership since 2002. His first book, [52 Leadership Tips \(That Will Change How You Lead Others\)](#) was published in 2006 by WingSpan Press. His second book, [Making Life's Puzzle Pieces Fit](#) was published in March 2009. Both are available at amazon.com. Greg is also the president of [Leadership Excellence, Ltd](#) and a Managing Partner of the Leadership Management Institute. Leadership Excellence, Ltd. effectively builds individuals and organizations to reach their highest potential through enhanced productivity and personal development using a number of proven programs. He is also the president and founder of [weLEAD Incorporated](#).