



Is Your Team Dysfunctional?

Avoid Disaster by Staying in the Moment

By Connie Dieken



You stride into the conference room gripping coffee in one hand, notepad in the other, ready for the first meeting of the day. But as the gathering gets underway, you sense something. *Bad vibes.* *He's* taking pot-shots—*she's* rolling her eyes. And *those two* just withheld key information as petty punishment. Suddenly, you feel as though you're one bitter exchange short of open warfare. What happened to this once cohesive team? And how do you solve the issue?

Success on the surface can mask turmoil underneath. Team turmoil is a smoking crater that, left unchecked, will ultimately explode. And when it does, it will trump your triumphs and sink your leadership. This communication mess can be prevented if you “stay in the moment.” I'll explain more about this connection technique in a moment.

No team is immune. Consider the mess the Hewlett-Packard Board of Directors recently created. This group of experienced leaders allowed turf battles, backstabbing, and a “respect gap” to fester and flourish until members finally resorted to leaking information to the press and spying on each other in their attempts to implicate each other. This toxic stew morphed into a full-blown corporate scandal: Congress called, the feds arrived, and indictments followed. The California Attorney General pronounced the whole debacle “colossally stupid.”

In her new book, *Tough Choices*, former HP CEO Carly Fiorina says she was poised to hire a communication consultant to deal with mutinous members years ago, but the board booted her before she had the chance. *Behind her back.* Of course.

Now, back to the “stay in the moment” connection technique. It's the skill to keep your antennae up and observe the cues around you. When you stay in the moment—*their* moment, not yours—you pick up on the subtle and not-so-subtle signals others send before it's too late. All people broadcast their druthers, verbal or non-verbal. When you stay in the moment, you can make crucial midcourse corrections to prevent mutiny. Problems won't linger because communication lines are open and candor flows freely and constructively. Misunderstandings, resentment, and anger rise to the surface and can be dealt with before they lead to disaster.

Here are a few tips to help you “stay in the moment” and connect optimally:

- **Manage turf battles before they manage you.** Candid conversation is the first step. If people are disgruntled or disillusioned, the situation can get out of hand very quickly.

Encourage dialogue and focus on goals that are bigger than individuals. This way, everyone on the team has a sense of purpose and belonging.

- **Communicate transparently.** Don't allow conversations to slip underground. Open communication creates an air of cooperation and trust, and it is important that this behavior be demonstrated by those at the top. People will be comfortable sharing information when they feel that their opinions are not only expected, but valued. On the other hand, distrust will slowly begin to develop if decisions are made in secrecy.
- **Listen for intent, not just words.** Often, people don't say what they really mean. What they *don't* express can be more important than what is shared out loud.
- **Make midcourse corrections.** When you pick up on clues, stay flexible and be ready to adapt. Great connections are made when people are responsive to others' needs even if the change of direction is not on the agenda.
- **Think dialogue, not monologue.** Inspire and engage people – don't lecture them. Instead of judging others' viewpoints, try to understand them. When everyone contributes, everyone benefits.
- **Lead by example.** No one is perfect, not even those at the top. If you make a mistake, admit it and encourage the whole team to learn from it. If *you* cover up errors, why can't everybody else?
- **Reward honesty.** When others admit mistakes or tell you the unpleasant truth, express your thanks. They took a risk and chose honesty over skullduggery. Reward and nurture this—it will pay off some day.

The debacle at HP began as a failure of communication that blossomed into a malfunction of leadership. A good leader must keep a team connected by putting tough issues and conflicts on the table to discuss them face-to-face. Navigate through personal agendas and you'll stop dysfunction in its tracks. Leaders who “stay in the moment” can recognize problems within their organizations and solve them long before disaster strikes.

Connie Dieken is an executive communication advisor and coach. She's the president of onPoint Communication, winner of a 2006 NAWBO Top Ten Women Business Owners Award, an inductee of the Radio & TV Broadcasters Hall of Fame, and the co-author of Communicate Clearly, Confidently & Credibly. She conducts workshops, keynotes, and coaching sessions and can be reached at 800.505.9480 or via e-mail at connie@onpointcomm.com