

NOTHING PERSONAL

Keep the focus on business.

BY NEAL WHITTEN, PMP, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

The most successful leaders don't make things personal. Instead, they know it's just business and behave accordingly. Consider a project manager I was recently mentoring. John has a lot of passion. He takes his job seriously and thinks other people should as well. Moreover, John doesn't like to lose and he doesn't like to waste time. He is easily upset when things don't go his way and always remembers when someone has "wronged" him and carries the negative feelings into future dealings. John thinks it's unfortunate the world is so full of foul-ups, incompetents and complacency. He's taking nearly everything personally—as if these actions and events were a conspiracy targeted against him.

His anger and negative emotions are impairing his overall effectiveness and his business judgment. Moreover, John's behavior is causing some of his co-workers to avoid him, harming morale and causing his career to stagnate—perhaps even laying the groundwork for losing his job.

Where's the problem? John is the problem. His expectations of others and of circumstances are far from realistic. He needs to let go of the hostility and focus, instead, on the business—on cause and effect. He needs to ask why something is happening and apply any lessons that can be learned so negative events do not repeat themselves. John will discover he has influence over some of the negative happenings and little or no influence over others. He must think accordingly. Doing so will improve his effectiveness and reputation.

Me, Me, Me

John is upset because of the way he chooses to think and process problems that come his way. Here are some situations that can set him off—and how he should handle them:

■ **A coworker disagrees with him on an issue.** John should consider the co-worker's view; there may be middle ground that's superior to John's initial approach. Even if a consensus cannot be reached, maintaining open communications where other peoples' views are encouraged, welcomed and considered, can add significant value to a team's overall effectiveness.



- **People arrive late to his meeting.** Clearly, this can be quite annoying. However, a late arriver often has a legitimate reason for not arriving on time. If a person is routinely tardy to John's meetings, then he should work with that person, and other appropriate staff as needed, to remedy the situation.
- **A project team member makes a mistake.** Who doesn't? John should strive to exercise tolerance. He should care about mistakes that people make, but care more about the people who made them.
- **A deliverable is lower quality than he expected.** John should see this as an opportunity to learn from the experience so it can be avoided or reduced in severity for future deliverables.
- **His project is canceled after several months of difficult and dedicated work.** John needs to accept the project is over—no matter what the reason—and move on.
- **His promotion comes later than he expects it should.** John should work with his boss to understand

what he must do, if anything, to receive a promotion or raise. But even then, he must understand the business may not be able to support the move at the time.

John is upset because he chooses to be—not because of the items in the list. We all have control over what we are willing to be upset by. It is a matter of how John chooses to think.

Some people tend to make situations appear personal, and some people tend to take things personally. Doing so is a sign of professional immaturity and serves to harm successful business outcomes. Resist allowing others to draw you into a personal conflict. Do things because they are the right business thing to do.

As leaders, most of us sometimes wrestle with the line between personal and business. At work, the objective is to have a successful business outcome. It's not about you. It's not about your ego. It's not about winning or losing. It's about the success of your assignments, your project, your organization and your company. It's about the satisfaction of your clients. It's about everything that helps us achieve business success. You should care about success.

You should work with passion and take ownership of everything that can affect your domain of responsibility. But in the end, when the dust has settled, it's all about what's best for the business. PM

Neal Whitten, PMP, president of The Neal Whitten Group, is a speaker, trainer, consultant, mentor and author. His latest book is *Neal Whitten's Let's Talk! More No-Nonsense Advice for Project Success—Over 700 Q&As.*



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