

A Gentle Bulldozer: Leading with Empathy



“But how can I push people and maintain good relationships?” I was surprised by the conversation with one of my clients, a c-level executive in a multinational organization. You might expect a man in this role to be a “driver,” but this leader is quite the opposite. He wants to lead, to stand up for what’s important, to rally people. At the same time, he values peace and kindness. Can these two exist together?

I told my client, “Sometimes people describe me as a gentle bulldozer.” I ran a business for 25 years, and, like all leaders, found there were many balls to juggle. People have differing needs, and sometimes the business needs and the personal needs are well aligned... but sometimes not. What I learned in that experience is it’s possible to have both. Maybe not both in the same second, but both in the same quarter. I’m committed to being an ally and practicing empathy. At the same time, I’m committed to moving the situation forward.

To achieve this balance, the skills of emotional intelligence are invaluable. In the Six Seconds Model of Emotional Intelligence, there are three “pursuits” that work in a cycle:

In Know Yourself we build self-awareness, we can each learn about our own strengths and vulnerabilities. We can understand what “pushes our buttons” and how to work with and around our own patterns. From this strong foundation, we can balance “Choosing” to get results, and “Giving” to build connection.

One of the key competencies in Choose Yourself is a skill called “Apply Consequential Thinking,” which is about evaluating costs and benefits. What is the result we want, and how do we optimally move toward that?

In Give Yourself, Empathy is essential. How do we meaningfully, authentically, connect with others and their needs?

When we put these together, something surprising emerges. It’s not an “either or,” it’s a “both and.” The two components multiply and we are able to move ourselves, others, and the organization forward.

- **Awareness:** Know Yourself is based on insight.
- **Choice:** Choose Yourself comes with commitment.
- **Purpose:** Give Yourself builds connection.



To put these steps in action:

1

Awareness

Invest in your insight by giving yourself a moment 3-4 times each day to review your recent reactions. Where are the moments you do something other than what your ideal? Pay close attention to those potential moments when you are “derailed”. Identify patterns of responding that compromise your leadership. For example...saying “Yes” in order to avoid conflict or maintain peace with the team, or over-controlling/under-controlling when you feel uncertain.

2

Intention

In thinking about one of those derailing patterns, identify multiple choices of how you could respond instead. Explore. Test an option that feels authentic and has the possibility of steering the outcome in a direction that leaves you feeling confident, motivated and fully expressed. Ask yourself, “What results would I like to achieve?” Then choose a new way of responding that aligns with those results.

3

Purpose

Ask powerful questions in order to understand others and to engage beyond the surface level. “What does this mean to you?” “What is most important?” “How do I want to show up as a leader?” Pay attention not just to others’ words, but to the feelings you can detect behind those words. Get curious. Also consider if there is alignment between how you are acting, the short term results you want, and your long-term goals. Repeat starting with step 1 and refine so your responses are better aligned to your personal purpose.

Follow these three steps at least once a day this week. What happens to your leadership? How do you feel at the end of the day? Can you unleash your gentle bulldozer?

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