

The Accidental Compliance Professional Lesson 15. A Guide to Being Delightfully Honest

We were at a leadership meeting and the discussion had been a particularly tough one. For an hour or so, everyone was stressed while we worked out a plan to fix our issue. At the end of that meeting, I could see how drained everyone was. I had taken a very strong stand and was pretty passionate throughout the discussion. So, I said, “Other than that . . . I feel pretty neutral about the whole thing.” Then everyone laughed as we got up to leave.

When I walked out of the meeting with my CEO, he turned to me and said, “I really appreciate how you use humor in our leadership meetings.” I was lost (as I often was with my greatest mentor Marc Dettmann)—he was always a few steps ahead of me. Marc went on to say, “You pick the right moment to make everyone laugh and lighten the mood. After a difficult conversation, you say something funny, people relax, and then we all move on. It reduces the tension.”

I was unaware of what I was doing, but it all made sense when he explained it to me. I think the reason why I started doing that was to make people feel better. I often waited until the difficult conversation was over (rather than while it was happening) so my humor would not appear to be making light of anyone’s perspective or downplaying the issues discussed. Years later, I realized that I was promoting honest conversation. My jokes helped reduce the pain that can come from having an honest conversation. Telling those jokes inadvertently promoted the honest conversations this CEO wanted to have.

Honest conversations can be painful, especially when everyone in the room is dealing with a tough choice. We all are reluctant to be honest. We all contribute to the problem. By trying to be funny at just the right moment, I was telling everyone: *It’s okay. We’re all good, so let’s move on.*

Be Honest, Gain Trust

Wanting to be honest is one thing—making it happen on a regular basis is a whole different thing. Honesty is not as simple as it sounds. Yet, as a compliance professional, you ask everyone around you to be honest. But before they can be honest with you, they need to trust you. How do you gain their trust? By also being honest with them. Trust and honesty are two very important tools in a compliance professional’s toolbox. Compliance professionals often ask people to do difficult things. Your success in convincing people to take a particular action is based in large part by how much trust they have in you.

So what does it mean to be honest? Whenever I write about this subject, I get emails from people thanking me and basically saying, “I’m told I’m a jerk and I say that I’m just being honest. Thanks for encouraging and supporting me.” But what I want to tell them is: *Don’t thank me. I don’t support people who are jerks hiding behind a cloak of honesty.* Not all honesty is the same—it can be rude or whiny . . . to good . . . to delightfully honest. I’m supportive of people who are *delightfully honest*—with unfiltered, unaffected honesty delivered with a smile that comes across without offending anyone.

Roy-ism: Honesty is the best policy, but delightful honesty is the best strategy.

I just met someone who is delightfully honest. Her name is Beverly Kracher, and she runs the Business Ethics Alliance in Omaha, Nebraska. Sometimes I get this feeling that I am missing something and it haunts me. It really bugs me when the feeling I have is that I'm missing something good. This happened after a few email exchanges with Beverly. It was pretty funny, actually. After the first email, I tilted my head to the side like one of those funny dog videos, but I had no idea why. Then one more email came, then another, and then I got it—she was being delightfully honest. In our email exchange, I made some observations about her success and perspective, and that I thought they were unique and effective. She shared something about how people view her unique approach and how some people don't really get her or agree with her. And she did so without throwing those who disagree with her under the bus. She was matter of fact about it, not defensive. She shared her thoughts on a sensitive topic as if she were commenting about the taste of a particular tea she was sipping. There are many people like Beverly in the compliance profession. Our profession attracts delightfully honest people and nurtures their honesty.

15 Tips for Honest Conversations

1. Talk about important truths with the same disposition as ordering a cheeseburger.
2. Often smile as you speak and remain delightful when others don't.
3. Ask questions after sharing something significant.
4. Don't criticize others' truth or try to jam yours down their throat.
5. Get to the point quickly and don't feel a need to talk all the time.
6. Don't interrupt.
7. Read people well and know how far to push an issue.
8. Study how people in the discussion are doing.
9. Disagree in an agreeable way and ask questions to help others see what they are missing.
10. Listen, see what others are not seeing, and share.
11. Nod while talking, not necessarily in agreement, but instead to encourage others to talk.
12. Love the process of sharing truths with others more than you want to change them.
13. Don't argue; have a conversation.
14. Look for the proper time to jump in and let others share their truths first.
15. Use humor, typically self-deprecating humor, to let everyone know everything is okay after a tough conversation.

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