

The Hijacking

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It was a hijacking, plain as day, by the light of day. It was quick; it was efficient, the hijackee never knew it took place.

Chris was walking in the hallway towards the Men's Locker room when Bill came through the door. Bill was a pretty good member, others liked him, he was even-keeled, never really complained and used the club often. He was a "helper," he always had ideas that would solve perceived problems for the betterment of the membership, and the breadth of topic requiring help was endless. He was an expert on golf, food, construction, tennis, health and fitness, throwing dice or playing cards. He had the solution - Chris just had to find the problem.

Chris's real problem was that almost as soon as Bill began to speak the hijacking occurred. Harvard psychologist Daniel Goleman refers to this as neural hijacking and they are fairly frequent. Sensory signals from the eye or ear travel first to the thalamus and then are sent to the amygdala and neocortex. The neocortex is the thinking brain - the one we really like to use when making decisions. The amygdala is an emotional sentinel that determines if a threat is involved. Bill was no tiger ready to pounce and they were certainly not in the jungle, but the ancient brain reacted the same and perceived the threat hijacking Chris's senses.

"Geez, Chris, I thought you were the Head Pro here," Bill said in good-natured humor. "Why can't your guys keep my clubs clean?" They were simple statements, blurted out in what Bill considered a constructive suggestion - he wanted his clubs to be kept clean, no big deal. But Bill was unaware that Chris had just left a meeting with Dave, the GM who had just cut his budget 10%. Chris spent one hour defending the fact that the department was on budget as approved last year. Dave had no idea that Chris had come to the club early that morning having spent a fitful night worrying about his son who was failing college and in danger of expulsion. And to bring it full circle, Bill had no idea that Chris had addressed the very same issue of attention to detail with his staff just yesterday. What Chris perceived, since the past evening was "You're a terrible person," followed up that morning by "You're a terrible professional." And the hijacking was renewed.

Most anything that Bill said after his first volley fell on deaf ears. Oh, Chris heard the sounds, but they were meaningless as Chris's brain generated response after response in an endless loop trying to recapture some shred of his self-esteem - he didn't need fight or flight, he just needed to end the hijacking and think.

Criticism is often taken as a personal attack; sarcastic criticism is nearly guaranteed to be taken as such. Rarely at a club do we need to be prepared to physically fight, but very often a well-meaning member may trigger the same emotions by threatening the

manager's self-esteem or dignity. Angry emotions will naturally arise when we feel that we are treated unfairly, rudely, demeaned or are just frustrated. When we perceive a personal attack we are subject to the hijacking of our senses. The word "why" is a powerful attacking criticism and Bill's use of sarcasm followed by "why" simply made Chris's leap from a peaceful discussion to a self-esteem threatening situation all the more immediate. Because of the compounding effect of both the previous evening's issues and the frustration of the morning conversation with Dave, Chris was a prime candidate for the hijacking; anger builds on anger and without resolving each issue, the anger was compounded, giving the hijacker quick and easy access.

According to Goleman in his book *Emotional Intelligence*, the measures for prevention of the hijacking are first to be mindful of the anger as it begins to stir, then to regulate it once it has begun and to empathize with the critique in an effort to mediate the anger. In simpler terms, feel the anger and reframe the issue more positively - immediately. A cool-down period is exceptionally helpful and sooner than later is better. Psychologist Dolf Zillman of the University of Alabama found that once anger turns to a high level of rage there is no turning back, a person falls into "cognitive incapacitation" where they just can't think straight. Therefore, it is imperative that the anger be caught soon, before escalation can occur. One technique that appears not to work is the catharsis - venting; Diane Tice of Case Western University found that after venting people felt worse and not better. The cooling down period is a time of distraction from the issues, virtually anything that keeps a person occupied and not thinking about the causes of the anger. Cooling down allows the brain to think rather than react.

"Bill, you're right, I'll ask Stan to get your clubs cleaned right away." Chris did an unusual thing - he answered and kept moving. Normally Chris would have stopped and chatted with Bill, but realized that there was a hijacking in place and was taking protective precautions. Chris headed to the office where time could be taken to cool down and then think of the real issues at hand. In this case Chris just needed to see the simplicity of the request - keep the clubs clean. The chances are good that after some time to think Chris will realize that both Dave and Bill are good people, just doing their part to help the club be a better place.

As professionals we cannot control the hundreds of members' personalities. We can, though, gain understanding of these motivational tactics and use that knowledge to make thoughtful decisions.

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