"Good Cop" Style

3strands Leadership

You're a member of a team. You might be the leader, or someone without management responsibilities. You have a meeting with two managers of another team, Natasha and Vito, to discuss a problem that occurred between your team and their team.

It's clear Vito doesn't agree with your conclusions. He interrupts several times to disagree and blame your team. Natasha asks him to let you finish. After you explain the full situation and ask them to consider your solution, Vito leans back in his chair with a big frown on his face and crosses his arms.

Natasha smiles, and asks questions to clarify. She seems open to what you've proposed, willing to admit their team made mistakes, and consider how they can take more responsibility moving forward. She starts to respectfully propose a compromise. It's not ideal because it means some additional work for your team that's typically Natasha and Vito's team's responsibility.

However, before Natasha can finish her thoughts, Vito interrupts. He claims their team did nothing wrong. The problem's all with your team, and your leadership. He's visibly angry, even somewhat threatening. Natasha tries to reason with Vito, but he dismisses her rudely and pushes all the responsibility for the problem and how to resolve it onto your team. This would transfer a lot of work to your team that's not typically your team's responsibility.

Vito's approach makes you uncomfortable. You know your solution is fair, and Natasha's compromise would unreasonably burden your team. However, Natasha's solution is better than Vito's nightmare. You'd like to avoid a full confrontation with Vito.

What you don't realize is Natasha and Vito are working together against you. They're using an old negotiating approach called, good cop – bad cop negotiation strategy.

This approach has two people or groups secretly working together to gain an advantage through what we call, "negotiation theater." The objective is to distract you from facts and logic, by increasing your emotional fear of a terrible outcome.

This negotiation strategy is effective because it connects you with Natasha. You trust her more quickly than you typically would because we tend to like and trust people who agree with us, and seem to have similar beliefs or interests. Your connection with Natasha is accelerated because

you emotionally exaggerate the reality of Vito's threats. This leads you to emphasize the positives of Natasha's offer. Basically, you're manipulated to wimp out.

Law enforcement has used this approach for decades with suspects of crimes. One cop approaches the suspect in a calm, empathetic way, encouraging her to work him because it will go better for the suspect if she does. If not, then the good cop can't stop the bad cop from breaking the suspect's kneecaps or hurting them in some other way.

Our understanding is this negotiation strategy works best when the bad cop goes first. This is important to remember as we repurpose this strategy for effective leadership.

Here's another example. This time there's no good cop: Bob's a leader. He's mad. He meets with an employee who made a mistake. He threatens them verbally, breathes-in and leans forward to appear formidable, and vents his frustrations fully with angry facial expressions and words. (Women can be equally threatening.)

The result: Most employees back-off, submit, and try to work around Bob moving forward. They meet Bob's standards where he measures performance, but slack off in areas he's less likely to notice. They just want to avoid a confrontation with Bob.

Bob's a bad cop flying solo. He destroys relationships rather than connects with people. His team is reasonably productive when he's micromanaging them, but otherwise much less effective. Employee turnover on Bob's team is high.

A leader with a bad cop behavioral style motivates through fear. This occurs when you allow emotions to take over and you get mad, then naturally make yourself appear larger and more threatening. It's a fight or flight reptilian response used by creatures in nature. It creates a you-versus-them division that breaks your connection with the other person, causing more damage. It focuses on being right and winning, rather than maintaining and strengthening the relationship.

However, our experience is whoever gets mad, loses. Therefore, we recommend a specific good cop behavioral style that humbly motivates and reinforces trust by being empathetic and friendly.

Good Cop Style

A good cop behavioral style is consistent with our 3strands leadership system. These are leaders who demonstrate Systematic Power, engage people in Meaningful Work, and fully embrace Sincere Gratitude. We have a separate guide on our website about 3strands Leadership.

3strands Leaders humbly demonstrate good cop behaviors to connect with people through positive interactions rather than the threats of a bad cop.

We believe you can ALWAYS use a good cop style.

3strands leaders with a good cop attitude are empathetic and engaging. We come alongside people to help them overcome obstacles, catch-up if they're behind, and/or learn new habits because their current behaviors are negatively affecting their results. Our humble approach reassures, supports and builds trust.

We use the pronoun, "we," when discussing issues and their resolution, although most if not all of the work is to be done by the employee.

Also, we use bad cops to balance our positivity with firm, empathetic boundaries that teach others the pain their mistakes cause cannot continue. When done properly, this approach isn't manipulative. It's respectful, efficient, and effective. Especially for leaders who tend to be too nice and/or want to avoid confrontation.

Who's the Bad Cop?

So, if you're always the good cop, who's the bad cop?

The bad cop is typically <u>not</u> a person, but rather a series of boundaries and consequences. Each bad cop has a cost. It might be lower productivity; lower profits; less money available for compensation or education; damaged relationships with coworkers, clients, or vendors; company reputation is damaged; or the mistake is illegal and someone's going to jail.

Here are some examples:

1. Your team's goals
2. Company values, standards, rules, best practices, and standard operating procedures
3. Client and/or other third party expectations
4. Federal, state or local laws
5. How the mistake hurts the career and/or compensation of the individual or team

3strands leaders have a responsibility to protect the person and your team from the bad cops. You do this by quickly, empathetically, yet firmly enforcing the boundaries. Be great at asking questions based on facts you've gathered, and even better at deeply listening to the answers.

What if an employee or team that's made the mistake doesn't agree? They are unwilling to take responsibility, improve their behaviors, and they deny doing anything significantly wrong.

It's simple. Write them up, or write them up and put them on a performance improvement plan, which is also called a "PIP." (We have a guide for a PIP process also.) Depending on the incident, and how often it's occurred, you may need to do this anyway.

Following-up on a PIP is where most leaders fail. Instead of checking-in with the employee after 30 or 90 days, an empathetic, courageous 3strands leader with a good cop style follows-up on a PIP daily for the first two weeks, and then weekly until it's complete. You encourage positive behaviors and results, and you always have a good cop attitude as you enforce boundaries.

If the employee is failing to improve for 2-3 weeks consecutively, then fire them. Another option is to place them on a transition plan to leave your company as quickly as you can without hurting your team or clients.

Start with Yourself

Who's the first person for you to hold accountable as a good cop?

Yourself.

Why? Because leaders must first apply our systems, best practices, and standards to ourselves. We have to practice what we preach to be an effective role model and leader for others.

How about you? Do you struggle to consistently, positively, and respectfully hold your people accountable when their behavior and/or results are poor?

If so, then you aren't enforcing boundaries for their behaviors. This approach not only allows the bad behavior, but encourages it, and subconsciously confirms the poor behavior is acceptable.

Behaving this way as a leader does more harm than simply increasing your stress. It disconnects you from the poor performers Worse, it alienates and lowers the productivity of your better team members who have to make-up for the errors of others. It also offends them that you're not managing everyone equally to meet your standards.

You can only avoid the confrontation so long. Then something blows up. Possibly you.

It's primarily your responsibility to catch your people's poor behavior, resolve the current issue the behavior has created, and develop new, healthier, more productive habits in the employee. Therefore, let's start with you, rather than your people who need correction and redirection.

Here are three steps that can help you develop a good cop style to enforcing boundaries:

1. **Know Your Strengths**: You have to know your strengths, to apply them effectively. There are three areas to focus on: Your natural behavioral style, what motivates you, and how developed are your core 25 soft skills? We do this with our Manage 2 Win Talent Assessments. This knowledge, and how you apply it, is a cornerstone to leadership skills.

2. **Stop Your Bad Habits**: Decide whether your approach is more towards one of two extremes: You're a "bad cop"-type of boss, who's threatening; or more of the opposite, a "good cop"-type of leader, who avoids confrontation.   Identify your bad habits, and how you're going to develop new, more powerful, positive habitst to overcome them.

   You may have leadership attributes, but also certain leadership skills that need work. Although you may be able to improve habits on your own, often leaders need an experienced, unbiased, professional coach or mentor for guidance and accountability to overcome their bad habits. It's similar to why people in Alcoholics Anonymous need a sponsor to overcome their addiction habits. If you haven't been successful enough developing your leadership habits on your own, then get a coach.

3. **Use a Good Cop Style**: This means you:

   a) Always choose the relationship over judgment or avoiding the situation;
   b) Never get emotionally angry;
   c) Calmly, respectfully, empathetically stand firm on boundaries;
   d) Ask questions to enable the individual or group to own their mistakes, the problem, and its resolution; and
   e) Follow-up to apply consequences, praise progress, and confirm success.

What's a Good Cop Style Look Like?

Demonstrate these good cop-like behaviors when a goal's at risk, or standard's not being met.

Here's one approach that's successful:

Phase I – Get Agreement

1. Explain the problem or mistake;
2. Confirm their behavior that contributed to the problem;

Relate to bad cop
3. Ask how that behavior of theirs is consistent with your company values, policies, best practices, and/or standard operating procedures;
4. Encourage them to consider how their behaviors and less optimum results are affecting others; and
5. This phase ends when they understand the problem, what caused it, how they contributed to it, and the bad cop consequences created by the mistake.

Phase II – Resolve the Problem

1. Teach them how to think so next time they know how to avoid or resolve a similar problem. This means you start by asking questions, so they learn to figure out what to do. You do not start by telling them what to do, or doing it for them;
2. Give them information or resources they've overlooked, or not previously had;
3. Inspire them to pause and consider whether they're focusing on what's truly most important;
4. Reinforce the belief that they can succeed; and
5. Walk through their solution, how progress and completion will be communicated to all parties, and how the resolution will be documented.

Phase III – Make it Stick

1. Teach new behaviors and habits that enable them to avoid repeating this mistake;
2. Connect the new behaviors and habits to their strengths;
3. If necessary, get them to commit to develop new processes so everyone in your organization can avoid similar mistakes. Set a deadline for the new processes to be complete and in test mode;
4. Discuss ways they can better manage their time because not being rushed helps them avoid mistakes; and
5. Follow-up to apply consequences, praise progress, and confirm success.

Real-life Examples

Let's close by considering two examples of how the process of a good cop style plays out in some common business scenarios:

SCENARIO #1

Without getting prior approval, an employee deleted a Client's digital file, or damaged a Client's property, and it cannot be repaired.

The 3strands leader finds out about the situation. Gathers information. Talks with the people who know of the situation, but didn't make the mistake. Meets with the individual who made the mistake, possibly with another person. Asks questions to confirm the facts they know, and fill the gaps of information they don't have.

Ask about the bad cop consequences, and add details if the employee can't fully answer the questions:

- How does the file deletion / property damage hurt the Client?

  EXAMPLES: Depends on the sigificance of the file or property. If it's accounting records or a confidential document, it could be a major loss and you can discuss specifics of the cost. Can a back up copy be found on any older system, or a replacement from inventory for the damaged property? Do they have to rebuild the data / broken property from scratch? It wastes people's time to do this work.

  What's the replacement cost? What if it's unreplacable?

- What part of our standard process was overlooked in causing this damage?

  EXAMPLES: Have the person bring out the checklist or process that should've been followed. Discuss whether the rest of the process was followed. Often more than one step was left out, or the entire process was done by memory versus a checklist. You can give examples of surgeons and pilots, who are incredibly smart people, but use simple checklists to make certain things aren't forgotten that cost lives.

- How does deleting the file or damaging the property violate our company values?

  EXAMPLES: Ask them to choose the values demonstrated by following the process. The answers vary based on your values. Briefly discuss how not following the process violated each of these values. There's almost always multiple values that've been overlooked. Consider having all employees, including leaders, memorize your values. If it's too difficult to remember them, then you might have too many core values.

Then focus on:

- How are "we" going to get through this? They do most or all of the work and communicate with others to correct the situation, unless it's more appropriate for someone else to do so.

- What can we do to avoid repeating this mistake in the future? Again, it may be only the person who made the mistake has to change. However, often a policy or management technique needs to evolve also.

- Now you've agreed how to correct the file deletion or property damage, or at least acknowledge it properly; and how to avoid a similar mistake in the future. When will the person update you everything has been done to correct the situation?

SCENARIO #2

A tech setup a new projector at a Client without letting anyone know or training them, but it changes the way they do something. The projector can access the internet and files on a network. The Client tries to use the new projector the next morning in a meeting and it doesn't work. They have to cancel their meeting.

The 3strands leader gets an angry call from the Client, or is told of the call. Gathers information. Talks with the people who know of the situation, but didn't make the mistake. Meets with the individual who made the mistake, possibly with another person. Asks questions to confirm the facts they know, and fill the gaps of information they don't have.

Then, you shift the conversation to the bad cop consequences, and add details if the employee can't fully answer the questions:

- The Client had to cancel their meeting this morning. How does that affect them?

  EXAMPLES: Individuals have to coordinate calendars to reschedule. Wasted time. Stress and frustration. Delays decisions that might be very important. This situation may get someone in trouble with their boss, or several leaders because of the delay...

- What part of our standard process was overlooked by doing the work and then leaving without informing anyone?

  EXAMPLES: The employee did not test the projector after the work was done. Although the Client figured out how to use it, the projector did not work. Our standard is to check-in upon arrival, and we confirm the work that's going to be done. Once the work is complete, fully test it. After the testing is complete, explain to someone the work that was done, and demonstrate how to use the new equipment. Ask if they have any other needs. Only then do you leave.

- How does not testing the equipment or discussing the change violate our company values?

  EXAMPLES: It's the same as the former example. Ask them to choose the values violated by not following the process. The answers vary based on your values. There's almost always multiple values that've been overlooked.

Then focus on:

- How "we" get through this, which means they do most or all of the work and communication with others to correct the situation, unless it's more appropriate for someone else to do so.

- What can we do to avoid repeating this mistake in the future? Again, it may be only the person who made the mistake has to change. However, often a policy or management technique needs to evolve also.

- Now you've agreed how to correct the file deletion, or at least acknowledge it properly; and how to avoid a similar mistake in the future. When will the person update you everything has been done to correct the situation?

We could go on, but the process is the same each time. The leader asks "what" and "how" questions so the individual or group can demonstrate they fully comprehend:

1. The problem and the pain it has caused
2. How to resolve it
3. How to avoid it in the future
4. People's responsibililties to resolve the situation
5. When they will communicate with others and you the work has been done, including any necessary confirmation it was done correctly.

Remember, you can be nice and always win if you're empathetic, respectful, and firm on boundaries.