



TRANSCRIPT

Episode # 41: How to Navigate Challenges Skillfully

You are listening to episode 41 of *Mastering The Power Skills*. So have you ever seen a colleague in a challenging situation or dynamic? Perhaps the company is changing things up or morale is bad or there are some kind of dysfunctional relationships. And somehow what that colleague is doing seems to be making the situation worse.

It's kind of like watching a train wreck and the person just can't seem to help themselves. We've all seen that happen at one point or another, and as painful as it is to watch, it's even more painful to be experiencing it yourself. So don't let that happen to you.

In today's episode we'll be exploring how to avoid a victim mindset when you're facing workplace challenges, and instead cultivate an empowered mindset that will allow you to grow and to navigate things more skillfully.

How much more could you accomplish if you were 25% or even 50% more influential and persuasive? Welcome to *Mastering The Power Skills*, the podcast that provides you with the tips, strategies, and the inspiration to grow your own power and win support for your ideas. And now here's your host, C-suite leadership coach Kathy Dockry.

Hi everyone, and welcome back to *Mastering the Power Skills*. It's been a while, hasn't it? So let me take a few minutes to explain why we've been on hiatus, and even more importantly, what our future plans are for this podcast.

So, why did I take a break? Well, the past months have been a particularly exciting time in my leadership coaching business. Two different clients have been selected for their first-time CEO roles in their companies. Now, you would think that's par for the course for someone like me who specializes in preparing leaders for the CEO slot, but it's seldom the case that two clients are transitioning into that role at the same time.

At any given time, I'm usually engaged with six to eight, possibly, leaders. Some of whom might be as long as three to five years away from the selection process. So usually, everyone is at various stages versus the same stage in their process and

their transition. And why is that important? Well, the process of being selected for and transitioning into a CEO role of a global company is not only very lengthy, it's also very challenging, complex, and very labor-intensive.

And that's true not only for the individual who is likely to become CEO, but for all the people who are supporting him or her, including the coach. So needless to say, I've been pretty busy as well, and putting out a weekly podcast was just too much work on top of all that. I had to take a break, but, you know, wow, did I miss creating these episodes and spending time with you guys, both in delivering what's on the podcast, but also in answering all your questions.

So now that things are settling down a bit for me, I'm happily back to producing episodes, but with a slight twist. I'm committed to producing new content for you at least once a month. In other words, new tips, new techniques, new strategies that will help empower you in the workplace.

And I'll also be joined from time to time along the way by other thought leaders and experts in the world of influence, persuasion, and presence, all with their own perspectives and insights on how those skills can help you become a powerful leader. So stay tuned, it's going to be a fun year for us.

And now let's get started on today's topic. I'd like to talk about a common way we can inadvertently disempower ourselves. This is a trap that any of us can fall into, no matter how capable and confident we are, if we're not taking steps to avoid it in the first place. That's because it's a mindset issue, more than a skill issue.

Why don't I describe what this trap looks like first? And it's important to understand how it arises, because it often feels different for each of us, depending on our own personal triggers. And after I describe how it arises, I'm going to give you a two-step process for, first, recognizing when you may have put yourself in a disempowered state, and then shifting yourself out of it.

So let's talk about the trap first. It shows up whenever you're facing a noticeable problem or challenge in the workplace. In today's episode, let's assume it's a big problem, not a small one. It's a challenge you have with a particular person, or with a workplace dynamic and it's weighing heavily on you. You think about it a lot, even when you're not at work.

It makes your emotions churn, and you're having thoughts like this. He or she is ruining my life. Or I am, or my role in the company is being disrespected. Or you might be thinking, after all that I've accomplished for this company, how can they treat me this way? Or another variation is, the only way out of this is if it's either

him or me left standing. Or it can be a complaint like the changes they're making around here are going to ruin the culture of the company.

These are all things I've heard actual clients say in confidence to me. And if you've been in your career for a while, I bet you've had some of those thoughts yourselves, or thoughts similar to one of those. You wouldn't be human if you hadn't.

When it's normal workplace frustration, we often get over these thoughts and feelings. It's kind of like catching a cold. We have these thoughts and feelings for a little while, and then we move out of them. They don't take over our life. But every now and then, they do take over our life. They feel less like a stray thought that we're having, and more like the reality of our situation.

In other words, it completely feels like someone is ruining our life, or disrespecting our role, or treating us poorly, or has even declared war on us. So what's the problem with having that feeling? Because after all, the feeling might technically be the reality of our situation, right? We might be assessing the situation correctly.

Well, having an assessment like that is not a problem if it's accurate, of course. Although, just as an aside, we might debate whether that assessment is in fact accurate. Even very smart clients of mine can get emotionally triggered and demonstrate some personal bias when they're sizing up a situation. But even if the assessment is technically accurate, getting too attached to it isn't useful. It doesn't help you solve the situation well.

The problem tends to weigh on our thoughts and emotions, and it also causes us to make unwise decisions, or at least it increases the risk of making unwise decisions. It interferes with us being good problem solvers. And it starts draining our power, our ability to accomplish things successfully. As they say in the old Austin Powers movies, I quote this to clients every now and then, you lose your mojo when you get too obsessed with what a situation or a person is doing to you.

And you kind of know that already, right? You've seen how you get distracted and stop feeling your normal, relaxed confidence when problems like these arise. There's a great Buddhist illustration of what we can do to ourselves when we experience a painful and challenging situation. It's called the second arrow.

The first arrow is the pain of the situation itself. We often don't have any control over the first arrow, it's just something that's happening to us. But the second

arrow is the pain of what we do to ourselves when we get hit by the first arrow. It's our mental and emotional reaction to a situation. It's the story we're telling ourselves about what happened.

We take an unpleasant situation and make ourselves feel even worse with the anger, fear, anxiety, resentment that we feel as we tell that story over and over again to ourselves. That pain that we feel from the second arrow is very real.

I'm thinking of a variety of my clients who were clearly suffering from the pain of the second arrow. And my heart went out to them. But often when they were in the grip of that pain, it was so hard for them to see what they were doing to themselves and to the people around them. They thought that it was other people who were causing the problems, but they couldn't see that they themselves had taken a bad situation and made it worse.

Eventually, I could get through to them and help them dial that pain back and recover their agency and their power to move through things more successfully. But one of the conclusions I reached as a coach was that it's less likely that you will shoot yourself with that second arrow if you know the risk of doing it beforehand, because if you wait to do something after shooting yourself with that second arrow, it's simply harder to take the action you need to navigate through

things successfully because you feel overwhelmed by those thoughts and emotions.

That's why I thought it was important to talk about this in a podcast so you know about this risk ahead of time and can be more successful in managing or avoiding it. So yeah, there's a lot of unnecessary pain you will feel if you shoot yourself with the second arrow, and that's not the only damage you might suffer.

You're also likely to make some reactive decisions that can hurt you in the long run. A common bad decision I see is getting paralyzed. You can get caught in that loop of stories about how unfair the situation is versus taking some positive and productive action.

So perhaps you need to have a hard conversation with someone, or perhaps you even need to remove yourself from a situation that's not a good fit for you. But instead, if you're caught in this loop, you keep on pushing these things off, the things you need to do, and you don't do them. It's almost like a form of magical thinking. You know, it's because you didn't cause a situation, you're just waiting for the unfairness to get noticed and resolved, instead of taking care of it on your own.

But meanwhile, you keep talking to other people about your grievances, and you're beginning to lose your power because the longer you wait to take a hard action, the more you're losing other people's respect and your own ability to get great things done.

Another common bad decision I see is overreacting, or going on the warpath. You lash out in some way, thinking that you are standing up for yourself. You're a warrior. But because you're in the grip of some strong emotions, you're likely to be hasty in thinking things through, and you're ignoring other actions you could take that would be far more successful in the long run.

Now, I strongly believe in standing up for yourself. It goes along with my belief that we need to acquire and use power wisely in our work lives. But I'm also a strong believer that when you stand up for yourself, you don't want to inadvertently give your opponent ammunition to shoot you down.

Corporate politics are complex. You don't want to move so fast and so aggressively that you overlook all the angles, including the possible risks to yourself and to your actual long-term goal. And when you don't consider all those things, the situation can blow up in your face spectacularly.

Again, these aren't theoretical concerns. I've seen both of these situations happen regularly to smart, talented leaders, getting paralyzed by a bad situation, or alternatively overreacting and shooting themselves in the foot. That's a whole lot of unnecessary pain. And long-term, it can cause a career that originally was on an upward trajectory to take a sideways detour, or even to go downhill.

So, how can you avoid that trap? Well, first, you want to get good at recognizing when you might be on the edge of falling into the trap itself. Here are several questions to ask yourself that will start to nudge you in the right direction. By the way, for those of you who are familiar with the concept of a growth mindset and how it leads to greater success, both of these questions are very typical for people who have a growth mindset versus a closed mindset.

So, one of those questions is this, is this situation happening to me or for me? Now, when you think something is primarily happening to you, you start to see yourself as a victim versus someone who is empowered. You put yourself in a box and you limit the number of possible solutions to your issue. After all, when you're a victim, you can only rely on someone else to help you out. You've completely eliminated the possibility that you could be your own hero who does courageous things.

On the other hand, when you reframe things as happening for you, even if it's something stressful or challenging, it encourages you to look for the reasons why that might be true. If you can see what benefits the circumstance might offer you, you can design a response that grows and empowers you versus puts you in a box.

So, let me give you a real life example to illustrate this. It's a global company that decided to reorganize its structure to remove layers at the regional level and to centralize more of the decision making at headquarters. The CEO of the biggest region, North America, was concerned that the decision could have adverse business consequences in the North American markets, but he felt he had no ability to force a reconsideration and he started to prepare for the necessary downsizing.

So, now let's look at this from the perspective of one of his direct reports. He was young, bright, and ambitious and could have easily given up hope because after all, his job might be eliminated or even if it was, his role would be diminished. So, if he viewed this change as something that was happening to him, he could have gotten angry, depressed, demotivated, et cetera, and either accepted a bad outcome or lashed out or quit to find another job.

Instead, he decided to view the situation as a learning experience that could help him grow his leadership skills. On his own, he developed an alternative plan for the region, one that delivered all the financial benefits that were the goal of the restructuring, but without some of the risks to the regional business that the original plan created. And he also developed a strategy for how the CEO could sell that plan to management at headquarters.

So, what was he thinking when he did this? At best, he thought he would score an impressive victory that would deliver a lot of career benefits. But even at worst, he still would have had the experience of sharpening his persuasion and influencing skills in a high stakes situation. In other words, he was taking a challenging situation and empowering himself to learn, to grow, and perhaps to have impact.

He decided to view the situation as a possible gift for his career, versus a damaging circumstance. In this case, there was a spectacular outcome. He actually pulled it off and the company accepted his plan for the region versus insisting on the original plan. Needless to say, it was quite the boost to his career. But that great outcome is actually in some ways irrelevant because he still would have been a winner in many ways, even if his proposal hadn't been accepted.

He would have come out of the experience with better skills and knowledge and with the respect of influential people who could have furthered his career, whether he stayed at that company or not. What really made the difference was that simple question that he asked himself at the beginning. Is this happening to me or for me?

So, here's another question that you can ask yourself to move yourself out of the victim box and into empowerment mode when you're facing challenges. And this question is, what would an already empowered person do? I love this question. I first encountered it when I was reading James Clear, who wrote Atomic Habits.

He said that if you aspire to be a person with a certain identity, let's say a person who's active and fit, but you're not yet that person, you can still develop the habits of an active and fit person. Every day, whenever you have to make a decision about something, just ask yourself what choice would an active and fit person make right now? Soon, if you do that, you'll be accumulating a lot of good habits, and eventually those habits transform you into what you wanted to be all along. In other words, you will be an active, fit person.

The same thing works when you're feeling you're being victimized. Instead of accepting your fate because you don't feel empowered, or waiting for someone else to save you or empower you, why don't you ask yourself, what would an

empowered person do right now? What are some mature and non-reactive next steps that a person like that would take?

Most of us can come up with some resourceful ideas. And all we have to do, once we have those ideas, is just go ahead and take those actions versus doing what a lot of us do, which is stewing in our own emotions.

Okay, now I just gave you step one for empowering yourself when you're facing a challenging work situation. In other words, several questions that will nudge you out of the emotional state of being a victim, and into the emotional state of feeling empowered.

Step two is, what does an empowered person actually look like? I think it's important that we get clear about this, because there's a Hollywood version of empowerment that is exactly what you should not do. So here's another example.

When I was first starting out in coaching decades ago, I had a client who was getting worked up about how her boss allowed colleagues to interrupt her in team meetings. She was avoiding having a conversation with her boss about this, and I encouraged her to have a little bit more backbone. In other words, if she

wanted to be taken seriously as a senior leader, she needed to show up more like that leader, a leader who was confident enough to talk to her boss maturely about the situation.

Well, unfortunately, she took it a little too far. She marched into his office and lectured him about the situation, since she thought that would demonstrate how powerful she was. Needless to say, although it all turned out okay in the end, we both had to do a little damage control because just venting your feelings or lashing out looks the opposite of being powerful. It makes you look insecure and immature.

So step two is to get really clear on what an empowered person actually looks like, so you can start showing up that way. How does a person like that think and behave? And what does good look like when you're acting in an empowered way?

So I'm going to give you a list of some of the attributes, and these are all things you can start getting better at yourselves. No matter how they feel, an empowered person doesn't think and act in a highly reactive manner. They might feel reactive inside, but they don't over personalize things. They come across to everybody else as cool, detached, and emotionally mature, and that's because they're more interested in getting to a good outcome than they are in venting their feelings.

They know that lashing out or acting from a place of anger or vengeance might produce short-term wins, but long-term costs in terms of reputation and respect. In other words, lashing out can disempower them in the long run. However, that doesn't mean that an empowered person is a pushover. They speak up if they feel that will be helpful. They just do that in a calm and a mature way.

They develop a good sense of timing and have a skillful understanding of when to push hard and when to back off. An empowered person has a great sense of perspective. They ask themselves thoughtful questions about what they really want to achieve in the longer term before taking any action in the shorter term. They usually have a preference for win-win solutions versus outright fights.

And if the situation looks hopeless long term, in other words there's not a solution that can be made of it, an empowered person will consider whether there are any short-term wins before they throw in the towel. They'll delay their decision. For example, will staying a little longer in a difficult situation teach them valuable skills that they can leverage later in their career? Or are there any relationships that they can deepen and leverage that will set them up for success in later roles?

All of these traits I just mentioned allow an empowered person to take responsibility for his or her own life and career and turn a bad situation into a better one in the long run. They become more resourceful. They learn more than their peers who feel victimized do. And they have more wins over the course of their career.

An empowered person realizes that unfair and challenging things happen to all of us at some points in our careers. But they also realize that when the arrow of unfairness or challenge shoots them, they don't have to worsen the problem by shooting themselves with the second arrow of victimhood. Instead of waiting for a hero to appear or lashing out in an immature way, an empowered person becomes the hero and takes responsibility for finding a path through challenging circumstances. He or she steps up to the challenge.

Now, it's often hard to do that, it's not always an easy task. But the attempt to do that is what makes the ultimate difference for your career success. Because ultimately, thinking and behaving in an empowered way is more rewarding and more enriching for your life and for your career. And of course, that's what I want for all of you.

So thanks, everyone. And I'm looking forward to spending time with you again next month. And in the meantime, if you have any questions on this episode, or

any questions on the topics of power, influence, persuasion, and presence, you can email me at the address that we'll have in our show notes. I actually love helping people think about these skills, and I look forward to hearing from you. See you soon.

Hey there, would you like some personal guidance about how to use the power skills of influence, persuasion, or presence in a particular situation in your workplace? Well, if so, we've got your back. Just send us a note explaining your situation to powerskills@significagroup.com. We'll drop that email address in the show notes. We'll feature your inquiry in an upcoming episode, keeping your identity anonymous, of course, and make sure you have some tips and strategies to help you navigate your particular situation skillfully.

Thanks for listening to this episode of *Mastering The Power Skills*. If you like what was offered in today's show and want more insights and resources from Kathy, check us out at www.significagroup.com.