



Beating Cleverness With Intelligence

By Elizabeth Ortega, Principal of ECO Strategic Communications

Surely you've been in a work situation in which someone pursues his or her own aims under the veil of cleverness. After all, clever business endeavors are coveted and celebrated, aren't they?

But, too often, clever performers are blinded by raw desire. They lose sight of the overall long-term effects and the potential collateral damage.

Eckhart Tolle addressed this phenomenon in his book "A New Earth," writing, "Whatever is attained through cleverness is short-lived and always turns out to be eventually self-defeating. Cleverness divides; intelligence includes."

Let's consider an event I witnessed firsthand. A group of lawyers went on a much-anticipated annual weekend retreat intended to spark new ideas and opportunities, and most

importantly, to bond outside of the office. The partners moved quickly through the key agenda items – financial reports, performance charts, benefits, business development strategies and a routine call to action.

It seemed like the team-building activities would get an early start until the last item on the agenda, a scheduling vote, ignited a resentful partner who would not take “no” for an answer. Suddenly, a nurturing safe zone was transformed into a stifling battlefield replete with dissatisfied litigators. The toxicity had permeated the space and would ultimately taint the entire experience.

A group of collaborative law partners had splintered into camps. It was no longer about the firm’s best interest – it became personal. I suspect some wondered where to hide from the train wreck as others laced their remarks with personal attacks. Not surprisingly, no one managed to win. Moreover, relationships were strained as a result of one person’s agenda.

In business interactions, we’re all susceptible to agendas that can lead to toxic situations. So that we don’t succumb to toxicity, let’s explore ways to master them:

Check Your Emotions

When confronted with conflict fueled by a personal agenda, step back and check your emotions at the door. Most likely, the issue is not about you, but about a force outside of your control. Keep negativity under wraps.

Instead, focus on the team and the team’s collective goals. Reiterate, through your words and actions, that your mandate is to promote

your business’ best interests.

Don’t be afraid to extend the benefit of the doubt. A genuine apology, if warranted, should rectify miscommunication. Delivering the olive branch will certainly establish whether the situation was a misunderstanding or a meticulous attempt to advance an agenda.

Set Boundaries

Don’t ignore toxic perpetrators, but don’t enable them, either. Promptly acknowledge the dissent, but repeat the team’s collective goals. There is no room for secondary agendas.

Uphold and protect the nucleus that binds the team together – the business’ founding vision and mission. Remind the group how its members are connected and how much stronger it can be as one united for.

Stay the Course

Stay the course by remembering the firm’s core values and your own. Focus on the good of the organization and speak up for yourself when necessary. Do not allow someone’s personal agenda to distract from the big picture. Hold detractors close enough to keep tabs on how they may be spreading negativity throughout the group, but not so close that their toxicity rubs off on you.

Abandon the Last Word

To keep things positive and moving forward, you need not engage in the fight for the last word. Protect yourself and the group from this losing tactic that only threatens further divisiveness by fighting the urge to have the last word.

About the Author

[Elizabeth Ortega](#) is principal of [ECO Strategic Communications](#). A Miami-based marketing agency that focuses on achieving lawyers and law firm's leadership goals in competitive markets around the world. Consistent with her leadership counsel to lawyers and in unison with clients, she recently co-founded [The International Academy of Financial Crime Litigators](#), a collaboration of experienced public- and private-litigation professionals working with the Basel Institute on Governance to ex-

pand worldwide access to solutions in economic crime cases.

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Marcus Weinberger

Marcus Weinberger is an ethical hacker who enjoys finding vulnerabilities in technology. Despite his young age, he has achieved a level of knowledge, skill, and understanding that enables him to execute sophisticated penetration testing, security assessments, and audits.

In August, Marcus presented an educational session at ILTACON, where he gave a live demonstration of various security vulnerabilities. His presentation was one of the most popular and talked about sessions.



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As Chief Knowledge Officer, Mr. Benamram provides White & Case strategic direction on knowledge management and technology and leads the K department in developing and implementing the systems and processes that enable the Firm to use its collective knowledge to benefit its clients worldwide.

Prior to joining White & Case, Mr. Benamram was Firmwide Director of KM and Head of the Israel Desk at Morrison & Foerster.



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