

Case Study

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Introduction

Laura is an executive in a non-profit organization in the United States. Her responsibilities include presenting health education seminars and lectures to adult audiences and colleagues, and also mentoring college students who are interested in health improvement fields.

I informed Laura that as my coaching client, we would only go in the directions she wanted in our coaching sessions. I also informed her that I would be conducting a 360-degree feedback survey of her professional and personal contacts of her choosing, and then I would be providing her with an anonymous report of those survey results.

Laura went right into her job issues in our first session. Laura was not happy with her work situation. She had been unable to implement the change she wanted to see in the situation on her own. Laura had been with her previous employer for several years, but because of a change in grant funding, she had to change employers. Her new supervisor was aware that she offered Laura a salary and benefits package which was very low for Laura's field and experience. During the upset over a death in the family, Laura did not scrutinize carefully the offer letter she accepted. Whereas Laura usually trusts people, this set up a mistrust between Laura and her supervisor. This supervisor was manipulative and gave pretentious compliments. She also

complained to Laura about other employees and managers, making Laura wonder what this supervisor was saying about her when Laura was not present.

When I asked Laura what would be the ideal work situation for her, she replied that she definitely wanted to feel more confidence in having the right to advocate for myself for what she needs in her role, without fear of how her supervisor will treat her. Laura told me that she doesn't need her supervisor's approval, though Laura will ask for it. Laura also told me that a better relationship depends on her supervisor and that she herself has no control over that.

I said to Laura, tell me what more confidence would look like. Laura replied, "the knowledge would be: this is what I need, and I just ask for it. My internal monologue is: is it normal to ask for it? If I ask for it, will it be validated? A planned strategy for the conversation about a raise would help."

Challenges Faced

I asked Laura if she had the same lack of confidence with previous difficult bosses. "No. It was different," she said. "A previous boss tried to blame me in front of our mutual boss. I spoke up."

I said to Laura, "So you've got it (confidence) in you! Is the issue a lack of confidence or a lack of strategy to deal with this supervisor specifically?" Laura replied, "I don't feel like I'm applying a strategy with my current supervisor. I'm genuine. I can't put something on that isn't there. I feel like I have to do that with her to not let her in. She wants to know what's going on in my personal life. Maybe that would be good: to strategize how much to share. If I share more, my innate blabbing, what I think and feel comes out. That may make the relationship better."

I had a realization about why Laura's handling of her current supervisor was so difficult. I asked Laura, "Does your supervisor exhibit narcissistic tendencies?"

"Yes!" Laura asserted her answer strongly.

I replied to Laura, "Narcissists require a different strategy. Help is on the way!"

Laura said that she felt relieved already.

Coaching Approach

After that first session, I emailed to Laura what I call my "narcissist survival kit" which is an evolving set of online resources I've been collecting which will inform and help to inoculate my clients against narcissistic tactics and abuses from supervisors and/or co-workers. Laura replied that these strategies would be useful: having realistic expectations; don't waste time explaining or engaging. "I tend to be honest and say what I'm thinking and feeling; setting boundaries."

Laura asked aloud, and then felt safe enough in our session to answer her own question, "Would being honest and saying what I'm thinking, and feeling be beneficial to the relationship? No. Giving her curated parts is better, to give her the appearance of vulnerability or connection would be better, but I'm sharing something that feels safe for me. I'm not sure what would feel safe because I'm not in the office with her." Laura works remotely most of the time.

I asked Laura the following two questions. She answered each in the affirmative.

"When you're speaking with your supervisor, do you feel less safe?" "Yes."

"Could using your internal guidance system be a tool you could use?" "Yes."

I asked Laura for an example of how I could help her solidify her use of that tool. Laura replied, “I’ll think about that one.” I also asked, “would you feel confident using your internal guidance system with your supervisor’s comments?” Laura answered, “I’d have to come up with examples ahead of time. That’d be a good strategy.” I added, “we could role play.” Laura replied, “That’d be good.”

We reviewed the preliminary interview questions which I would ask her contacts for her upcoming 360-degree feedback report.

Liz revealed to me, “There’s a possibility for a new job. Will I have the same value? What impact would I have? What does staying (at the current job) look like?”

Process and Sessions

Laura and I had a total of 10 online coaching sessions. Each coaching session was approximately one hour in duration. In addition, there were the hours I spent scheduling and surveying her eight contacts, then inputting the survey results from the seven questions I asked each of them into Laura’s 360 degree feedback report.

After the third session, I asked Laura, “How has the coaching been?” Laura answered, “Good. Telling myself a different story will help my professional life. Building up that narrative.”

I presented Laura’s 360-degree feedback report during our fourth session. “That was a quick turn-around. Thank you!” Laura replied. As she read it, Laura showed a surprised look several times. She also chuckled more times than I had ever seen her do. We discussed details in her feedback report and I answered her questions about the report.

“Today, it was good to get feedback that I’m methodical and patient because part of me wants to get going from my current job.” Laura also said about the report, “I could have used some of this for my (new) job interview.” I assured her, “You’ll have it for future ones.”

In our following sessions, we focused on building Laura’s confidence, dealing with her current job, necessary conversations with her supervisor, and Laura’s decision whether to take a new job offer. It was a financial risk, but the negative situations with her supervisor at her current job were mounting along with that supervisor’s treatment of Laura’s colleagues. I coached Laura as Laura did her due diligence, gathering intel from family, friends and/or former employees of the new company. The new job also presented a new role which had never existed before, and Laura was so excited about the new role itself that she lit up every time she talked about the new role’s duties.

Results and Impact

Laura was concerned about what her current supervisor was thinking about her. I told Laura, “let’s take one criticism that the supervisor has made to you, but just one.” I then asked Laura, “Is it true?” Laura thought about it for a few seconds, then Laura replied, “No.” That’s the answer I wanted to hear. I wanted Laura to unburden herself from being under her current supervisor’s unjust criticisms. And I wanted to show Laura how she could de-stress in this way, by herself, methodically.

I role played with Laura and coached her on the salary negotiation which would occur during Laura’s next conversation with her possible new supervisor, specifically having the

confidence to ask for a salary she deserved. Laura was appreciative of this coaching, and she said she felt more confident.

Laura decided to resign from her job, and she risked accepting the new job full-time. She worried if she would be as good as the person she was replacing. That same executive was part of Laura's second interview and she sent to Laura a glowing email about how Laura was the best candidate by far. I recommended to Laura that she write what that executive said about her on post-it notes, put the post-it notes all over her house and look at them every day, especially before starting work each day at her new job.

I also told Laura that she would bring her unique strengths to the role. I reminded Laura that they selected her for this new role for a reason. I recommended to Laura that she connect with current colleagues on LinkedIn and ask them to write recommendations for her, which she could attach to her LinkedIn profile. Laura thought that was a good idea and she noted it on her to-do list. And I reminded Laura to re-read her 360-degree feedback report which was full of compliments and acknowledgments. Laura did this.

Client Testimonial

A friend of Laura's who knew about our coaching sessions said to Laura, "I like this new you!" Laura said to me, "Having you as a resource has made this (job transition) process less painful, and empowering, so thank you! I'm more confident in my gut feeling, in my strength of my own ability to set boundaries and recognize other people's stuff, and I don't have to take that in." Hearing that made me feel fulfilled as a coach! It was evidence that I profoundly affected my client and helped her change her life for the better.