



## Episode 70: How to Manage a Frustrating Direct Report

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum, and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. Today, let's start some questions. As you think about the people you manage and work with, who's easy to manage? Who seems to immediately understand what you want and what the plan is, and jumps right in to do the work?

I hope these people bring a smile to your face as you think about them.

Now, let's shift gears to the people you lead or work with who are more frustrating. Who comes to mind? What's hard about leading or working with them?

As you think about these people, notice how your body feels and where your thoughts go. I'm guessing you feel tense or tight, or have thoughts about the things you wish they did differently.

Today's topic is how to manage or work with others with less frustration. Today, I'll share an idea and a tool that you can use when you feel your frustration levels starting to rise, so that you can return to feeling more calm in your body and brain.

In coaching, I often hear about people's frustrations with others. Clients tell me: "I told my direct report what we were doing, and it doesn't seem like they're moving anything forward." Or they tell me "They've been here for 6 months and they should know what to do by now."

The thing about frustration is that it gets in the way of relationships. That's because when we are frustrated, our brains are not thinking effectively. When our brains are not thinking effectively, they easily slip into judgement mode. And when we're in judgement mode, we make assumptions about other people; we label them and our brains make up stories about them.

When we're in judgement mode, we think things like: "They don't understand the job. They're being difficult. They're not listening to me. They don't care." Our brains take limited data and jump to conclusions that they treat as fact. When we're in judgement mode, our brain has made a decision about someone and their abilities.

This has the potential to become a problem when working with or interacting with someone. If our brain has made an assumption, it leaves little or no room for curiosity.

Imagine a seesaw on a playground. If you've ever been on one, you know that when the person on one end is up, the person on the other end is down. That's how it works with judgement and curiosity. When our brain is in judgement mode about others, there's no room for curiosity.

And most of us need more curiosity when it comes to other people. The gift of curiosity is that when we can channel that, there's more exploration, openness, and appreciation.

That's the big idea today: you can either be in judgement mode or in curiosity mode.

When you think about the difficult people you manage or work with, I'm guessing you're in judgement mode. You've already made up your mind about the person and what they're thinking.

The cost of being in judgement mode is that it keeps you feeling stressed in your body and keeps conversations limited and stuck.

If you want to feel differently about the people who usually frustrate you, the answer is to bring more curiosity. And I'm not just talking about a little bit of curiosity; I'm talking about 100% pure curiosity. Radical curiosity.

When you bring radical curiosity to someone, it expands the relationship and changes your perspective. And our perspective creates our reality.

Let's make this real with two client examples. Here's the first example: My client shared that he was frustrated because he discussed a project with his direct report, and a few weeks later, he hadn't seen the progress he would have expected.

My client came to coaching complaining about his direct report. He was in judgement mode. And, he's also a leader who wants to develop this person. So we practiced curiosity.

Curiosity is a mindset, and it's also a practice. The tools we use to practice curiosity are open-ended questions. Here's how we start. To invite my clients to shift into the mindset of curiosity, I ask them this question:

If you could bring 100% pure curiosity to this person, what might you be curious about?

This question sounds easy, and it can take the brain a minute to let go of judgement and shift into a new perspective.

If you want to start shifting from frustration to curiosity, ask yourself, "If I could bring 100% pure curiosity to this person, what is one thing I might be curious about?"

Then, as you identify areas you might be curious about, you can start formulating open-ended questions that you could ask with openness and curiosity.

As I coached my client, we talked about some areas he might be curious about. My client realized he was making a lot of assumptions. He realized that he didn't know all the things his direct report did every day, and he could ask with curiosity, "What other tasks are taking up your time?"

He also realized that he didn't know how clear his direct report was with which decisions he owned. He could ask, "Which decisions do you feel confident to make yourself, and which ones are you waiting on me for?"

My client recognized that his judgement was keeping him from asking his direct report more questions. He was so focused on the things his direct report was not doing that there hadn't been much room to pause and bring curiosity about where else clarity was needed.

Here's a second example. Another client was complaining that her direct report was resistant and negative in their check-ins. My client spoke heatedly for a few minutes, listing all the ways this direct report undermined her. She was in judgement mode.

Now, whether or not those things happened, the cost to being in judgement mode is that it keeps us stuck. When you lead someone, what they do or say or think is out of your control. Let that go.

At the same time, you need to remember what is in your control: what you say, how you say it, the questions you ask, and the mindset you bring. As a manager, your job is to try different approaches with people to see what happens. Staying in judgement keeps you from trying different approaches.

What's needed is curiosity. Curiosity allows us to innovate with a new approach or bring a different energy. When I pointed out the judgement to my client, it helped her name and see how she was in this perspective. It helped her build her awareness.

Professional growth takes awareness and then choice. When we have increased awareness, we can then choose to try something differently.

I asked my client, "If you could be 100% curious about something with this direct report, what might that be?" She thought and said that she could get curious about what her direct report was learning these days. She could ask an open-ended question like, "What is something interesting you've been learning about recently?"

Shifting into curiosity and asking open-ended questions can transform a conversation. If you show up differently in the space, it allows the other person to show up differently. Conversations go in new directions, as people learn something new about each other. Trust and respect deepen, which often make it easier and more enjoyable to work together.

Curiosity also helps work move forward more easily, because asking and answering questions helps to clarify areas and approaches that were assumed, and not fully discussed. Conversations starting with curiosity can lead to identifying obstacles and joint problem solving.

Here's my invitation to you. In the next few weeks, be on the lookout for your judgement mindset. When you hear and feel it, invite your brain to get wildly curious instead. Ask yourself, "If I could be 100% curious about the person who's frustrating me, what might I be curious about?" And then see what happens.

Building your curiosity muscle and practice will help you stay calm and centered. It will help you coach others more effectively, and be a clearer and more collaborative leader. And that's something you'll be proud of role modeling.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. If you want help building your curiosity muscle, please reach out. Email me at [deb@debelbaum.com](mailto:deb@debelbaum.com) or go to my website [debelbaum.com](http://debelbaum.com) to schedule a consult. I look forward to it. I'm here to help you create your best self at home and at work, so that you're confident you're moving in the right direction for you.

Until next time!