

## If They Don't Care, Don't Waste Your Time

Try to change people who don't care, and you end up wasting everyone's time.

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My mother was a first-grade schoolteacher back in Kentucky. In her mind, I was always in the first grade, my father was a first grader, and all of our relatives were in the first grade. Mom was always correcting Dad's grammar. Whenever he made a grammatical error, she would give him that stern first-grade-teacher look and bark, "Bill! Bill!" For some reason, we decided to buy a talking bird. Within a couple of months, the bird was chirping, "Bill! Bill!" Now poor old Dad was even being corrected by the bird!

One day when Dad was 80 years old, Mom began her thousandth grammar lesson. He looked up at her, smiled, and sighed in his crackling voice, "Honey, I'm 80 years old. Let it go!"

Does my mom sound familiar to you? Have you ever tried to change the behavior of someone who had absolutely no interest in changing? How much luck did you have in this religious-conversion activity? My guess is none. How much time did you waste? My guess is lots.

I have asked these questions of hundreds of people. Sometimes the context is the office, and sometimes the context is the home. But their answers are almost always the same: "I have spent a lot of time and produced no results. In fact, I am only succeeding in frustrating myself and annoying the people I want to change!"

These efforts can be particularly nettlesome at work. As an executive coach, I have a unique business model: I don't get paid if my clients don't get better. "Better" is not determined by me, nor is it decided by the person I coach. The pre-selected stakeholders who work with the person I coach ultimately judge if he or she has improved.

I will never forget the first time I didn't get paid for my coaching activities. What was my biggest problem in this case? My ego. *The Wall Street Journal* had just ranked me as one of the world's leading executive educators. This went straight to my head, you might say. I started believing I was so great that I could save people. I had the delusional fantasy that other people would get better solely because of my presence.

My client just didn't care. He had a problem treating people with respect. He didn't care about the people he managed, and he certainly didn't care about me and my newly won reputation. When I asked him why his coworkers felt he did not respect them, he grunted, "Because they are all fools!" This comment should have been a hint. I should have said good-bye. But no. I believed I was one of the world's leading consultants, remember? Unfortunately, I was being one of the world's dumbest consultants.

When working with this uncaring client, I began to feel that I was aimlessly pounding my head against a brick wall. After 18 months of complete failure, I cut my losses and admitted defeat. I learned three hard lessons:

1. I can't *make* people change if they have no interest in changing.
2. "Big ego" and "money-back guarantee" don't mix.
3. For a brief spell, I had turned into my mother.

For you, I have an equally hard lesson: You can't *make* people change, either.

As a coach, I have finally learned to work only with dedicated leaders who are committed to personal improvement -- great people who want to become even more effective. I work with people who care. I help executives change only what *they* have chosen to change. In the end, that is all that I can do anyway.

If you are a manager, you need to qualify the people whom you are coaching in the same way I qualify the clients I coach. Your time is very limited. You are probably too busy now. Invest your valuable time only where you will get a return. The time that you are wasting in attempting to coach people who don't care is time that is stolen from helping the people who do.

I know that sounds harsh, but you really don't have a choice. What can you do with a person who doesn't care? Knowing when to let go, as I ultimately did with my uncaring client, is perhaps the hardest aspect of coaching. But once it's clear that your message isn't going to get across, you have but one option.

As a Buddhist, one of my goals is to help you have a happier life. Do you have any objection to this goal? If you are still trying to change people who don't care -- either at work or at home -- let it go. If you never learn anything else from me, please remember this. You'll not only have a more productive life, you'll be happier, too.

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