



turning managers into leaders

Merge's Monthly Mega Minute – January 2009

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Merge Gupta-Sunderji turns managers into leaders. Through engaging keynotes and facilitated workshops, she gives people specific and practical tools to achieve leadership and communication success. Contact her at www.mergespeaks.com or 403-605-4756

Sea anemones and clownfish

A few weeks ago, I was stung by a sea anemone – ouch! My fault – I was trying to get a closer look at several clownfish that were swimming merrily amongst its tentacles. After all, the fish were doing well, so it didn't occur to me that I might not be. Turns out that sea anemones and clownfish have a very special relationship: they are a classic example of mutual symbiosis – the biological phenomenon where two unlikely species co-exist their entire lives together for mutual benefit. Mother Nature has orchestrated a relationship where the territorial clownfish protects the anemone from anemone-eating fish such as butterfly and parrot fish, and in an elegant *quid pro quo*, the stinging tentacles of the anemone protect the clownfish from its predators in the ocean world. To make this happen, nature has given the clownfish a special coating to protect it from being stung by the anemone itself.

Mutual symbiosis is clearly a masterpiece of nature, but it can be just as stunning a success in the workplace. If you are a leader in your organization, then you should be consciously seeking to create symbiotic relationships. Actively seek to surround yourself with people, both employees and co-workers, who are unlike you – people who think and act differently from you, and who have different strengths and weaknesses than you. Then, use your strengths to help others overcome their weaknesses, and vice versa; create symbiotic relationships where your skills are complementary, so that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Finally, despite your efforts to create symbiosis, there will be times when the potential for stinging may occur – when that happens, it's your job as a leader to provide the special coating to prevent or soothe the sting.

Let me give you an example. If you are a visionary leader, details may not be your strong suit, so make sure you have at least one methodical person on your team. When this person's degree of analysis begins to create friction with others (and it will), it's your job to soothe the sting and keep moving forward, while still allowing the analytical person to contribute fully to the team.