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## “That’s Just Martha!”

Does your company have a “Martha”? Most companies do. Using the name “Martha” as a symbol, most companies have an employee who either due to tenure or talent everyone endures.

A “Martha” is often a long term employee whose behavior has been “allowed” or for years. People hesitate to confront “Martha” or give her any critiquing as she reacts negatively every time. “Martha’s” often walk into a team meeting as if they bring a black cloud with them. “Martha’s” often push back to anything new. “Martha’s” are often critical of your company or other employees. And what is so sad about “Martha’s” is how it dilutes the spirit of team and in many ways gives excellent performers permission to misbehave themselves. Anyone can see that no one is addressing “Martha’s” behavior so why should their standards need to be so high?

The other category I often see for a “Martha” type is someone whose behavior is poor but their expertise is high. The company then endures the poor behavior, attitude, dress or style in order to keep “Martha’s” talent within the company. I have seen this as the case with an excellent lender, compliance officer, head of accounting and numerous other scenarios where once again everyone endures poor behavior and says “Well.. that’s just Martha!”

Often the “Martha’s” of the world are very intimidating. This causes other employees to “walk on eggshells” and endure this toxic behavior amongst their team. This wearing behavior is simply wrong.

So what’s the solution? Well it’s never easy but it comes within a category in my coaching and leadership classes called “Caring Enough to Confront”. The leader cares enough about “Martha” for either long term contribution to company, talent, or any other attributes and certainly cares enough about the overall team to **confront the situation**. One does so with tact, consideration and professionalism. **Remember leaders, “Martha” is a direct reflection of you!** And... there are seldom any secrets in companies. So what do people really talk about... “Martha!” Often times they also talk about you for not dealing with the situation.

So here are the steps for **Caring Enough to Confront**:

1. Confront any situation needing to be changed ASAP.



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2. Schedule a private meeting no longer than one hour from the request time. (This keeps you from fretting and them from stirring up more trouble.)
3. Rules of the discussion.
  - a. Separate the person from the wrong action.
  - b. Confront only what the person can change.
  - c. Give the person the benefit of the doubt.
4. Start by stating the purpose of the meeting. This means articulating exactly what needs to change and what **actions** are taking place that are causing the challenge.
5. Be specific. You should have collected data, actions and times and be well prepared with examples for this meeting.
6. Avoid sarcasm or words like always and never. These are dangerous and typically caused by your emotions.
7. Tell the person how you feel about what was done wrong. Example: “Your actions of disrupting the last meeting, by telling a joke at an inappropriate time, was a disappointment to me.” The emphasis is on the action not the person.
8. Give the person a game plan to fix the problems. This can be a request or a non-negotiable instruction. In this area be totally clear and specific. Example: “Martha failure to change this behavior may require a written action plan in your personnel file.” Or, “Martha, I have full confidence that after this conversation your actions will change.”
9. Explain the consequences either negative or positive of your request.
10. End by affirming him or her as a person. Example: “You are a valuable employee Martha and I am confident these changes will occur.”

Many companies incorporate the 1, 2, 3 strikes you're out approach. The first time the incident or behavior occurs a formal conversation takes place. If the behavior repeats itself, then there is a dialogue with a written notice signed by both manager and “Martha”. And if a third occurrence takes place the individual is terminated.

I have seen a number of companies that have used the second dialogue on a Friday afternoon where documentation is put in a personnel file and a request is made of the employee to really think about whether or not they want to be a contributing employee. When they return on Monday there is an expectation for them to share a written action plan which is then reviewed on a systematic basis with them and their manager.

While this is not a cheery subject it is one that goes on in almost every business I have consulted with or provided training to. Please be mindful that an individual's poor behavior has an effect on everyone and is a reflection on you the leader. Make certain that you have clarified expectations with all team members and that expectations with a “Martha” type are made particularly clear. Call for accountability as well. Be very specific on what performance and behavior should look like. Anyone that's been in my classes knows I believe in daily coaching. That is 2 -10 minutes of proactive dialogue initiated by the manager using the technique of asking open ended questions. By asking these open ended questions such as “tell me about your plans for this project” or “what do you think the best approach is to create sales of \_\_\_\_\_?” you honor the employee by

asking their opinion and stretch them as they need to come up with a plan. **Observe, reinforce and communicate often.**

If a “care enough to confront” conversation needs to take place make sure that afterwards all behaviors become normal. Don’t avoid or coddle. The conversation should be as short and direct as possible. If the employee... “Martha” behaves even more poorly after this discussion and then ask them to leave and come back with a new attitude the following day. Remember you have not caused this problem it is your responsibility to correct it. This responsibility is both for your team, company and yourself.

Assuming that progress takes place, build on it. Observe positive areas of progress and as appropriate provide feedback and compliments.

If after these attempts “Martha” continues poor behavior **do make the right decision** and let him or her go. Often times more things come out of the closet after a difficult employee’s departure than you knew. There is a sigh of relief and a new spirit among your team. You as the leader have a responsibility to provide a good environment to come and contribute to your company.

I am hoping this bit of information is particularly helpful for you. It is an area that I am asked to speak on very often. Friendships are developed, allegiance to a company is noted and it’s a hard thing to address. You will be proud of yourself though when you do, and others will thank you.

In Jim Collin’s book *Good to Great* there is a message I have kept with me for years; that is, “every moment that you are avoiding having a discussion where you truly hold an employee accountable, is a moment that you are keeping them from finding success elsewhere.” This really holds true in the case of “Martha’s” of the world. Caring enough to confront means you care enough to help them either within their current job or another company where they can find fulfillment and be happier in all aspects.

Here’s wishing you success with your “Martha!”