

PROTAGONIST CASE STUDY

From a Potential Lawsuit to a \$6,000,000 Check!

A compelling example of the direct impact that classroom learning can have on top line revenue generation.

It was August 2016. For the past 18 months Ashot and his team had been leading a large-scale digital transformation project for an energy distribution company.

Over the prior 6 months issues had surfaced such as missed milestones originating from both sides. With each delay the two teams sat down and renegotiated new milestones and begun anew. Our new launch date was now September. One month away.

Ashot received a new notice, 'No way we can launch in September!' The frustration had been mounting on both sides. They got by with 3 delays, but it was getting tense. Both parties were deeply entrenched in a negative cycle of blame, pointing fingers at each other for the delays.

The team took a collective deep breath and proposed a November date. They felt confident that this would give both sides enough time to work through any issues and still hit this new target launch date. Ashot received yet another more frightening notice. This time it was from the client finance team. They demanded that they take November off the table! The CFO was facing a year-end close and said it would be too much for them to handle at the same time. The finance team counter proposed a March launch date.

Ashot thought to himself, "we're at a stalemate! There was no way we could wait until March! That was over six months away and it would put us way over budget. Plus, our credibility was on the line." Ashot and his team were fuming, and he was thinking that if they did not resolve the differences quickly, they could be looking at a substantial

lawsuit that would create chaos for both parties. Ashot was feeling anxious beyond measure. The stakes were high, and they needed to resolve this, and fast.

Meeting the Challenge

It was at this exact time that Ashot was enrolled in a class being delivered by Protagonist Consulting Group. On the first day of the program he was led through several experiential exercises designed to increase influence with key stakeholders. These included how to be fully present and listen more deeply to the needs and concerns of others. One of his favorite tools was the use of a simple yet powerful self-regulation practice for focusing and getting into the present moment. It used the words:

Breathe – Connect – Land™

It was as simple as it sounded. Breathe in, connect with what is most important, then breathe out and land the intention inside of yourself. Ashot would soon learn how important these tools would be in a subsequent call with his client.

Ashot was introduced to another model for open communication and dealing with conflict. It has four steps:

Observe – Think – Feel – Want (O-T-F-W)

The essence of the model is that people fall into the trap of blame and judgment when they are unable to emotionally disentangle their own experiences of conflict. A person needs to clearly reflect on the observable facts of their experience first, then on what they were thinking at that time, then on the actual feelings that resulted from those thoughts, and finally on what it was they wanted or needed in that moment. The critical piece of the process is to avoid projecting blame on the other person that comes out in statements like, “I feel neglected”, or “I feel betrayed”. These false emotions are not true

feelings, but judgments on someone else's behavior. The facilitator explained the four aspects of the model and, to demonstrate, asked if there was someone who had a high-stakes, unresolved situation with a client.

The issues with Ashot's client had reached a boiling point so he willingly volunteered. He started by giving some context. Many in the room knew the situation. He outlined the recent interactions between the two working groups and mentioned the phone call he had scheduled first thing the following morning.

Surfacing the Paradox

As Ashot proceeded to move through the O-T-F-W model he started to project blame onto his client counterparts through the guise of feelings. He said that he felt deceived by what the client had been saying and then doing. Ashot was immediately reminded to stick to what he was actually feeling and not assign blame on the other party. Ashot then experienced something remarkable. He said, "I experienced two opposing emotions about the unresolved situation. On one side, I was excited to see the light at the end of the tunnel on this project. On the other, I was concerned and discouraged that the two teams were at odds with each other with no obvious way forward."

Ashot was then asked to repeat the process taking the point of view of his client. This proved to be an eye-opening process. By taking the time to consider what his client had observed, and what she might have been thinking, feeling and wanting, Ashot was able to get out of his own myopic position on the situation. He was able to build true empathy for her situation.

It was by taking both points of view that Ashot realized the root of the problem. They were operating from a fixed pricing structure. On his side, they were frustrated and blaming the client team for trying to squeeze out the most fixes and features and keeping them from the anticipated launch dates. First and foremost, Ashot and his team needed to get the framework up and running.

The client, in turn, was blaming him and his team for cutting corners and not bringing the most value. The teams were not aligned, mistrust was mounting, and both were losing their footing quickly.

Then Ashot had a realization. He saw that the path forward hinged on communicating this paradox to his client. He left the session feeling confident in his approach for the call the next morning.

The Way Forward

That evening Ashot began writing his thoughts out on paper. He was now better able to put himself in the shoes of his counterpart. He realized that, due to the fixed pricing structure they were operating under, she had lost authority with her team. There was no incentive for her team to distinguish between the “nice to have” and “have to have” fixes and features. The client team no longer responded to her appeals and felt no sense of urgency to move forward. In addition, the client steering committee was fast losing confidence in her ability to lead this project. In order to regain standing in the eyes of the committee, as well as regain influence with her team, she needed the right incentives in place that the fixed pricing did not provide.

This was the strategy that he was able to carry on his call with his client. Ashot’s goal was to frame a plan that would return authority to her. But first he knew he needed to build a relational bridge between the two of them. He needed to be fully present on the phone with her and project a calm presence.

Once on the call, the O-T-F-W model gave Ashot a clear way to communicate his position to her without falling into the cycle of blame. He listened deeply in the conversation to see if she was experiencing the same paradox as he. She did and was able to see that the path to the finish line lay in changing the pricing structure under which the teams were operating. By the end of our call, they were able to get on the same page with the same incentives and sense of urgency.

The next step was for Ashot and his client to sit down with the key people involved and begin moving forward together. As it turned out, from her perspective, getting to the finish line was worth the outstanding six million dollars that was owed. She initiated the payment immediately.

Sweet Victory

Ashot returned to the learning session on day two and found the group already digging into a new exercise. Everyone turned and looked at him anxious to hear what happened on his call with the client. He was grinning from ear to ear. The key point he relayed to the group was that the model gave him a clear pathway to express his thoughts. He was able to acknowledge the miscommunication that had taken place over the last several months and expressed the impact that it was having on both teams. He was able to say this without blame. He was also able to say to my client the following. "All that we want is to move toward a successful launch, on time and on budget. I imagine that this is what you want as well?" She agreed. He then said, "I also imagine that you would like to be treated fairly in the process." She perked up in agreement. He then said, "This is also what we are looking for." For the first time in many months Ashot and his client were on the same side of the table agreeing on a positive way forward.

They were able to get beyond the cycle of blame and align on three key areas: The first was the shared outcome to achieve a successful launch on time and on budget. The second was to align on values, they both wanted to be treated fairly. Finally, was to change the commercial incentive structure. It was a win-win.

Return on Investment

Continual learning is a must for any organization struggling to achieve its strategic goals. Without the opportunity to work through the issue in a classroom setting Ashot and this client might have found themselves entrenched in a protracted lawsuit.

Reflections: Moments that Matter

A couple of months after working with Ashot in my program, I was able to speak with him about how things had progressed with his client. He happily reported that he and his client continued to work collaboratively and launched the platform. It was the most successful launch they ever had. He also noted that several moments of truth had occurred that made a significant difference. One was during an in-person meeting with the client when she took a moment to apologize to him for the way her team had been acting. He expressed how much her words meant and, in turn, acknowledged his team's contribution to the problem. This was a powerful moment of connection between the two of them. She also told him that once the new commercial structure was in place, she had let her group know that the negative behavior had to stop. Also, the steering committee was very impressed by her ability to move the project to a successful completion.

He said that her whole presence and demeanor had changed. She stood taller, her voice was stronger, and she was much more relaxed inside of herself. *It was not only a digital but a personal transformation as well.*

Critical Communication Skills

The best businesses who lead full scale transformation projects realize that the true nature of their work goes beyond their technical competence. Success comes from their ability to build and sustain quality relationships and resolve a multitude of interpersonal issues and conflicts with their clients that invariably crop up. These issues tend to take the form of differences in expectations, lack of communication, and a cycle of blame between parties. The deep seeded mistrust between the two teams in this case study was rooted in the misalignment of the pricing structure. It created different incentives for each team. It was not until authority was restored to the client, and the teams were aligned, that the process could move forward.

Ashot took away several key learnings:

Perspective: Continual learning is a mindset. As leaders we are all entrenched in our day-to-day activities and executing a multitude of tasks. It is critical step back, reflect and see these interactions from all sides.

Skills: None of us know all the answers. Even the best in any field need to find time to learn and grow. The time that Ashot took to work on self-regulation, presence and communication skills were critical elements in achieving collaboration with his client and her team.

Practice: Having the opportunity to try on the new behaviors in a safe learning environment was crucial. Colleagues can provide feedback and insights that are immediately useful. Being able to learn from and with each other makes a huge difference in daily performance in front of clients.