



## Marta Brockmeyer, Ph.D. Project Pointers

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### POISED FOR PARTNERSHIP



A long-time leader recently talked about a series of difficult meeting days and I mentioned how stressful it must have been. She responded, "Stress? This was stress to the 100th power. We don't even have a word for it!" So, my language-loving husband created a new term for her: **Ex-as'-po-nen'-tial**: Stress to the 100th power!

While I hope this word is never needed in your nonprofit, it may resonate. In the last few weeks, three colleagues called to discuss essentially the same topic: a colleague's controlling behavior and its resulting stress. The situations were so similar, it seemed like a good time to revisit this tricky topic. And, the newsletter may be particularly helpful for those of you in partnership discussions.

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### TURNING POINT



#### Responding to Controlling Behavior

When faced with controlling or aggressive behavior, first stop and consider your feelings. It is possible the person reminds you of someone or behaves in a way that triggers memories of past emotional abuse. Once you have reviewed your feelings and are sure you are reacting to this colleague, then you can respond with more confidence. The following guidelines may be helpful:

**You matter.** You have a legitimate right to be treated humanely and professionally. You are not required to absorb the blows of a rude colleague, especially one who is consistently this way. No matter how smart the person may be, bullying behavior is flat out wrong. By the same token, don't diminish your integrity by mirroring the person's style. Understated professional behavior is always more effective.

This reminder is especially important in a partnership exploration if one of the nonprofits is much larger (often interpreted as having more power) or if the leader's style suggests she is doing you a favor. I often must remind the leader of the smaller nonprofit that he and his board members are equal partners with the other CEO and board representatives in this particular process.

**Focus on the behavior.** As much as you may dislike your partner's personality or attitude, you can only address their actions. Try to make concrete, specific comments about behaviors that you wish to see changed. Describe how her behavior impacts your ability to do your job and suggest alternatives. For example, you might tell her that constant interruptions during merger committee meetings make it difficult for the group to stick to the agenda.

**Choose your moment.** Timing is so much in life, especially when dealing with a controlling colleague. If you are exhausted and frazzled, you may not have the emotional capacity to begin the conversation. Location is also important. If he has been yelling at you in the hall, you might wait until he is in his office to talk. Also, try to think through any personal distractions before confronting him to be sure you are not reacting to something else. What matters is that you communicate calmly and clearly and begin to experience a series of small successes.

**Walk away.** If your partner makes you so angry you cannot speak. . . don't. Call a time out and compose your thoughts. This may also give her an opportunity to calm down enough to listen to your feedback. Shortly after the experience, seek her out and tell her how you feel. She may be more willing to change if she feels you are meeting her half way. Aggressive people need to feel they are in control, so give her enough room to save face without violating your rights in the process.

It would be a rare partnership discussion that did not include at least one melt down. Usually, more than one person is angry about some hot button issue under discussion, so the entire committee may need a break. If one of the leaders delivers an ultimatum that amounts to a deal breaker, the calm partner should suggest revisiting the topic at a later time.

**Practice being a broken record.** If your colleague is used to getting his way through force or threats, he will probably dismiss your comments initially. Begin to systematically say the exact same thing over and over. Counter each demanding comment of his with a simple, clear, assertive message, even if it feels awkward. You might ask a friend to allow you to practice saying no until you perfect the message. This technique works surprisingly well over time, especially if others on the team do the same thing.

Despite using these strategies, you still may not get the results you want from your colleague. What you will gain, however is self-respect and a realistic take on whether or not the controlling behavior is open to change. We are under no obligation to tolerate aggressive behavior and this may be the proverbial blessing in disguise. Several times in my partnership career, I've seen a leader's "true colors" emerge. In each case, the other executive director was relieved that discussions had not gone further.

**Resist temptation.** It is oh, so tempting to respond to controlling behavior by gossiping, launching counter attacks or enlisting various passive-aggressive moves. These responses will only serve to reinforce the person's offending style. Their behavior will be more extreme and difficult to overcome.

Most of us have worked with someone whose goal is total dominion over the workplace. If he or she is particularly difficult now, consider the above reminders before responding with a short temper. You may not have multiple opportunities to apply your best communication skills.



I never know what questions will pop up during the course of a week, but here are a few recent ones:

**Q.** How much should we involve our stakeholders?

**A.** The answer depends on the type of project. If you are doing strategic planning or a needs assessment related to programs, you probably will want stakeholder input. Otherwise, it will be difficult to know what others feel you do best and what services they would like for you to provide. But if you are working on a formal merger exploration, then you would not involve stakeholders until the board has voted to move ahead. At that point, it would be very helpful to gather ideas from those outside the organization, and it can be a great public relations tool for promoting the combined entity. Of course, much of our work falls somewhere between these two examples and requires an individualized response. In general, I tend to support asking those in the community when planning.



**Q.** When will we need a lawyer during partnership discussions?

**A.** The size and scope of your project will determine this. If you are exploring a full corporate integration that combines two or more organizations, legal services will be required. Most human services organizations that are working toward a merger use the same lawyer, a practice that often surprises people. Some larger organizations with special circumstances may wish to retain their own counsel, but the more common decision is to share legal fees. In most cases, the environment of good will and common purpose eliminates any adversarial tone. By the time a merger steering committee has worked for months to learn about both nonprofits, most concerning issues have been resolved.

It is a good idea to have one or two lawyers on the merger steering committee. Even with this available talent, specialized legal expertise may be needed at some point. The goal is to keep these engagements focused and brief, in part to save resources for the final steps that require significant attorney time.

**Q.** How do you manage working at home?

**A.** The subtext on this question usually relates to potential distractions. Sure, this year has been a challenge because of various renovation projects. But generally, when I'm working, I pay little attention to domestic matters. I accomplish more when working from home because - in theory - I can better organize the environment to be efficient. When I worked as a staff member, I experienced more interruptions and distractions even though I enjoyed my colleagues. Of course, this is largely a personality issue. Being self-motivated and inherently social, I never feel isolated. I also do not want to pass on to clients the expenses that go with renting an office.

Knowing how you work best is the key. Some people are more effective in a traditional work environment and should pursue the location that supports their strengths.

More Questions? Just ask and I'll include them (anonymously) in an upcoming newsletter.

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## POINTING TO A GOOD READ



When I run into colleagues, we quickly find ourselves discussing books. It is always fun to receive recommendations and learn who's zipping through what book. These discussions have helped me avoid some clunky bestsellers. Friends know I have a 30-page rule: if I am not totally hooked in 30 pages, I set the book aside. If someone has raved about a book, I may go to 50 pages. Life is short and there are way too many good books waiting.

A few recent books I loved:

*High Noon: The Hollywood Blacklist and the Making of An American Classic*: by Glenn Frankel. This compelling read covers the casting, filming and impact of the movie. Who knew?

*Playing with Fire* by Lawrence O'Donnell. A fascinating look at the 1968 election and the resulting events that moved us to our current civic state.

*Seducing Mrs. Robinson: How "The Graduate" Became the Touchstone of a Generation* by Beverly Gray. My fellow Boomers will appreciate this book about the making and meaning of the movie. Don't we all remember when and where we saw this one?

Of course, I'd be delighted to receive your reading suggestions!

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## PARTNER SERVICES SPOTLIGHT



I work with and refer an exceptional group of local independent consultants who have a deep understanding of our region and provide a wide range of skills. The services in one specialized content area follow:

### **Revenue Cycle Management & Optimization (RCM)**

Billing and claims support are on the way!

Many nonprofit organizations find their Aging Accounts Receivables have become less manageable over the past few years. Traditional RCM practice management reports fail to identify, let alone resolve, the source of the problem. The root cause may be due to an outdated billing system, provider credentialing or contract issues, staffing deficiencies or payer policy changes.

Rejection and Denial Rate Reports should be generated and reviewed to identify the presence or absence of technical issues within the clearinghouse. The clearinghouse permits an electronic interchange to take place between your billing system and the insurance carriers. Often, we forget to look at the clearinghouse as the root source of problematic Aging Receivables. Specialized reports are easily generated and allow for better decision making.

Expertly produced reports can help you analyze your Medicaid claims data and reduce inefficiencies within the billing department. Because Medicaid enrollees can change monthly from plan to plan, it is critical that the registration and intake staff be correctly trained to use the verification tools for coverage and benefits. Nearly 40% of denials are related to front office errors but many are simple technical issues involving the clearinghouse set-up or work processes associated with using clearinghouse services. Obtaining and tracking these clearinghouse reports will allow you to rule out or resolve technical issues before they negatively impact your bottom-line.

The answers may be at your fingertips! Let me know if you'd like to learn more about the partners who provide these services.

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## WORKSHOP REMINDER



Marta's popular Project Management Basics workshop will be offered this month. This workshop receives consistently high marks from participants.

"Thanks again for your outstanding project management class. People are using your techniques and the methods are working." -- Executive Director, Behavior Health Organization

**Project Management Basics**  
Tuesday, September 18, 2018  
9:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. at Interact for Health  
3805 Edwards Road, Suite 500  
Cincinnati, OH 45209

[Course Outline](#)

## WORKSHOP REGISTRATION

### Workshops on Site

For convenience and increased participation, you may prefer an in-house workshop. When a larger number of employees share concepts, language and tools, projects move along more smoothly. In some cases, a series of customized follow-up activities complement the foundational workshop. Evaluations from recent on-site trainings have been enthusiastic. Please contact Marta for more information about in-house, customized training.

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## Leadership Council for Nonprofits

I have worked with this organization several times and cannot say enough about it! If you are looking for ways to invest in your leadership and staff and would benefit from peer support groups, Leadership Council for Nonprofits might just be what you need. The council also connects you with resources that can help lower expenses and increase revenues.

This union of 170 non-profit agencies in the Greater Cincinnati region is a dynamic and growing network, representing about one billion dollars of revenue and well over 14,000 employees. It offers its members opportunities to:

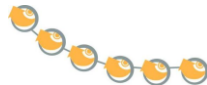
- Build leadership and capacity through its signature programs (Leaders Circles, Leadership Challenge, LIVE to Lead 5-part leadership series, and the Executive Director mentoring program)
- Connect with other leaders through its events, including the Securing the Future Conference each March, annual meeting in April, and holiday party in December
- Collaborate with each other by participating in the 2018 Compensation & Benefits Survey, the medical insurance pool and other programs
- Cut costs through participation in one of the many cost-savings programs (office supplies, reduction of student loan debt, human capital management services, fundraising software, unemployment and workers compensation)

Interested in learning more? Feel free to contact Executive Director, [Jenny Berg](#) for more details.

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## End Point

William James said the greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another. Let's make wise choices. Hoping your early autumn days are light on stress, informed by good books and enriched by kind colleagues.



In partnership,

*Marta*