

46 A Small Problem of Size

A manager phoned me, to ask if I could come in to talk to one of his supervisors. A couple of the supervisor's team had been to see the manager, separately. They were both upset, claiming the supervisor had bullied and intimidated them.

The manager could not understand



The power of blind spots... the solution was simple, and consisted entirely of raising self-awareness.

this. He knew the supervisor, and knew him to be a hard working, conscientious man “who wouldn’t harm a fly”. The manager had spoken to the two staff members, asking for evidence.

They’d both quoted his overbearing manner, and harsh way of speaking to them. The manager next spoke to the supervisor, and neither could see any evidence of a belligerent manner or use of language.

So the manager asked me if

I’d speak to the supervisor and the two staff members. I agreed, and made an appointment to see the supervisor.

I knocked on the supervisor’s office door, and as he opened it, I knew straight away what the problem was likely to be. The supervisor was a giant of a man, at least 6’ 3”, with a sallow complexion, and with big black bushy eyebrows and moustache. He invited me into the office, but stayed at the door, after closing it,

leaning on the top of a 4-drawer filing cabinet!

He asked me to sit down, and continued to stand, talking to me from behind my back. I turned to face him, and asked if he would sit too, which he did.

I then asked two questions. Firstly, did he typically talk with people in his office while standing? He did, and said it helped him concentrate if he walked around... Secondly, I asked for his estimate of the heights of the two women

who'd complained. He said they were both quite petite - about 5'3" or 5'4"....

As we talked, his voice was deep and booming, and sounded gruff, though again there was no intent to be so. And as he got agitated (for example, about a lack of resource) he raised his voice...in frustration - though it could easily be interpreted as shouting. He also tended to jab with his finger or a pen. It was easy to see why others might feel intimidated and threatened in his

presence.

We agreed he'd be better sitting for all conversations (to equalise the height differences), and to consciously work at speaking in a softer and slower tone - and keeping his hands folded...

This story beautifully highlights the power of blind spots. The manager (himself about 6' in height) and the supervisor were both unaware of the intimidating power of the supervisor's

physique and behaviours. It didn't matter that the supervisor had no intent of intimidating - his physique and tone were enough, combined with his unconscious pattern of standing and prowling when talking, and jabbing a finger for emphasis.

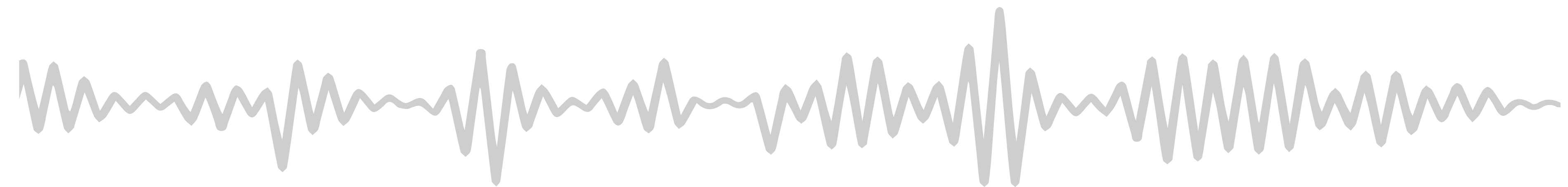
“If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten” (R. Kipling)

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