

Coffee Talk: Two Sugars One Life Conference Room Lisa

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I ruined Lisa's Tuesday because I was absolutely certain I knew what she was thinking.

I didn't.

Conference room. Strategy meeting. The kind where someone says "let's circle back on that" and a little piece of everyone dies. Nine adults performing 'Professional Human' while their brains scream about mortgage payments and whether that weird noise their car made means financial ruin.

Lisa from marketing was quiet. Not her usual self.

Normally, Lisa treats meetings like her personal TED Talk opportunity. Opinions about everything from font choices to fiscal policy. She once gave a fifteen-minute impromptu presentation on why we should change our email signature format. She had slides. That she made on her phone. During the meeting.

But today? Silent. Staring at her notebook like it contained state secrets. Zero engagement.

My brain, helpful as ever, began its interpretation: *She's disengaged. Checked out. Probably job hunting. Planning mutiny. This is about that time you questioned her social media metrics. She's never forgiven you.*

All of this analysis happening in about three seconds while I'm still saying something professional about Q3 projections.

If you've ever been 100% certain you knew what someone was thinking, and been 100% wrong, you know where this is going.

So naturally, I called on her. Directly. In front of the whole team.

“Lisa, you’ve been quiet. What are your thoughts on the Q4 strategy?”

The temperature dropped fifteen degrees. The fluorescent light seemed to pause mid-flicker, like even it knew something terrible was happening.

She looked up. Professional mask cracking like safety glass in slow motion.

“I... don’t really have thoughts on Q4 right now. Sorry.”

But I wasn’t done. My brain had momentum. Like a truck rolling downhill with no brakes.

“That’s concerning. Your engagement in these meetings is important. Is there something preventing you from being present?”

Everyone in the room became telepathic, all sending the same message: *STOP. STOP TALKING. FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, STOP.*

“My dad died yesterday.”

Nuclear detonation.

“I’m here because I didn’t know what else to do. So no, I don’t have thoughts on Q4 strategy. I have thoughts about funeral arrangements and how to tell my kids their grandfather is gone. But please, tell me more about my engagement metrics.”

Your assumptions aren’t facts. They’re fiction written by your brain to explain things it doesn’t understand.

I’d taken someone drowning in grief and thrown her an anchor disguised as a leadership opportunity. I’d been so confident in my interpretation that I never considered asking a question instead of making an accusation.

Lisa left. The meeting continued with all the energy of a funeral where nobody liked the deceased. I stood in the bathroom afterward, staring at myself in the mirror, realizing I was the villain in someone else’s story.

Not the complex, misunderstood villain with a tragic backstory. The incompetent villain who accidentally traumatizes people while trying to demonstrate leadership skills.

Here’s what I learned: I did notice something was wrong. My brain correctly identified “Lisa is not her usual self.” That part was accurate.

The problem was what I did with that observation. The leap from “something’s wrong” to “I know exactly what’s wrong and it’s about me.” The confidence that turned observation into accusation without ever pausing to ask.

Three days later, Lisa came back to work. Performed ‘Professional Human’ flawlessly. Never mentioned it again. I sent flowers. Apologized privately. She accepted gracefully because she’d already used all her emotional capacity on actual grief and had none left for my learning experience.

Here’s to the pause between noticing and assuming. And to everyone we’ve accidentally hurt while being certain we understood.

Cheers, Clayton

Coffee Talk 2.0: For everyone who’s ever been spectacularly wrong about what someone else was thinking.

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