

# Dysfunction Doesn't Make Cents

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**HR** professionals are often called upon to intervene when the behavior of grown-up employees isn't so, well, grown-up. This article offers three steps to help you better address perfectly legal yet rude, crude and socially unacceptable behaviors that can cripple productivity.

## STEP ONE: CHANGE THE WAY YOU THINK ABOUT THE PROBLEM

HR professionals hear all kinds of things about people sent to you for help. Most of the time, however, the individual isn't the ogre they've been portrayed to be. However, it's easy to fall victim to what social psychologists call the fundamental attribution error. This is the tendency to blame character defects instead of situational defects when something goes wrong.

Perceiving the problem in terms of character defects keeps you stuck in the problem because this thinking limits you to only one solution: personality reconstruction! That solution requires the individual spend the better part of a decade in intensive psychotherapy. Who has time for that? Expanding your thinking beyond personality and into situational deficiencies will help you to ask different kinds of questions, look for different kinds of causes and bring more effective solutions to the table.

While training to become a psychologist, I conducted behavior modification groups for perpetrators of domestic violence. It is very easy to fall victim to the fundamental attribution error when addressing this extremely dysfunctional behavior. Looking at the problem through the situational lens, however, leads to different ideas about cause such as lack of self-awareness, lack of awareness of impact on others, lack of education about frustration tolerance and woeful deficiency in coping skills.

What I came to learn through that work and what I fundamentally believe is this: People are always doing the best they can with what they've got.

Take, for example, the angry employee, a.k.a. the one in your office that everyone is convinced is a psychotic lunatic. This employee yells, screams and flings various heavy objects about his office during fits of rage.

The easy conclusion to draw is that this person is a jerk. Maybe that's true. However, following the principle that he or she is doing the best they can with what they've got, it leads to a solution-oriented assessment that goes beyond dismissive and unproductive labeling. It leads to the conclusion that the problem

(and therefore the solution) rests in addressing **what** resources the individual has, not **who** the individual is. In sum, it is the skill set that needs improvement.

Aha! Now we have a way to a solution. We can teach skills to increase self-awareness and, in time, change specifically identified behaviors.

## STEP TWO: FOCUS MORE EFFORT ON THE PERSON IN THE POSITION OF POWER

HR professionals are often called upon to intervene in a situation that involves multiple people and has escalated to the point of crisis. So, the committed HR professional rolls up his or her sleeves and begins to investigate. While these may not be the actual words used, the message communicated to HR goes something like this:

"Help me! Help me! My boss is an evil villain. She's Darth Vader! She is controlling, micro managing, and manipulative. She's mean. She's rude. She doesn't even give me so much as a, 'Hello. How are you?' before she starts barking out orders."

Then HR speaks with "Darth," and hears something like this:



"The problem isn't me. It's my report. He lies. He slacks off. His behavior is completely unprofessional. Last week he hung up on our biggest client! I can't trust him. I hold high standards of professionalism and require that client care always comes first. Frankly, I think that he is part of a rebel alliance trying to get me fired."

People in conflict like to create narrative about what has occurred that's easy to understand, such as good versus evil. While these story lines make for great fantasy, here in the real world it's usually much more complex. Both sides probably have some atoning to do. However, there's no disputing that the person with more ascribed power within has more ability to negatively affect others with his or her dysfunction. Sure you have to deal with all guilty parties, but when both parties are engaging in unsportsmanlike conduct, it's usually wisest to put your primary effort into the person with the most ascribed power.

The person with the most ascribed power enjoys more privilege, wields greater influence and therefore has more responsibility to bring his or her behavior under control. By focusing on this person, you accomplish more. People in positions of power impact many work lives. Helping these individuals to improve behavior changes the culture

within their entire sphere of influence. This could mean tremendous return on the time and energy you invest.

### STEP THREE: ENGAGE IN MANY, SHORT MEETINGS FOCUSED ON CLEARLY DEFINED BEHAVIORAL CHANGES

Giving someone a good talking to may feel like you've done something and it may even yield some short-term results. But substantial, qualitative change takes patience and a long time to create. Research indicates that in order to change the way we do something we literally have to rewire our brain. This takes time, patience and practice.

The undesired behavior has been practiced many, many, many times over the course of the individual's career. This means it has become automatic. It's sort of like driving your car to work. It seems that you leave your house and all of a sudden you find yourself at the office. It's as if the car drove itself. That's because the behavior is so rehearsed, you aren't consciously aware of doing it.

Learning new behavior requires paying attention. When you learned to drive, for example, you had to consciously remember to look in the review mirror. Now, it's automatic. It's the same with learning to behave differently.

Research also indicates that learning is much more effective when dosed out in little sips over time, rather than swallowed in one big gulp. This is because new learning requires that we load new information from our short-term memory into our long-term memory. This requires multiple exposures to the material in order to create successful transfer.

Your intervention does not need to be either elaborate or complicated. Supportive conversation focused on goal attainment will do the trick. One HR professional found a short walk with his employee once a week during the lunch hour to be highly effective. They spent the time talking about alternatives to problem behaviors and strategizing better ways to approach frustrating situations. This went on for

about six months and much improvement was gained. Both left the experience quite satisfied with the outcome.

In terms of expectations, first and foremost: Expect backsliding. Change doesn't happen in a straight-forward progression. It's often a case of two steps forward, one step back. Backsliding is a normal part of the process.

Secondly, don't expect a total transformation. The identified individual will still have skill set deficiencies and may continue to be difficult and unlikable at times. There still may be a lot about interpersonal interactions he or she doesn't understand. When the training is over, the individual still may not understand, for example, that it affects people negatively when you purposely ignore them at staff meetings. This deficiency is certainly not desirable. However, it's far better than humiliating an employee at a staff meeting by calling him or her some kind of animal body part or throwing a cell phone at that person's head.

So, remember: Focus on changing specifically identified problem behaviors with the individual in power, and plan to spend several months engaged in the effort.

We live in the real world and you can't change everything. However, by using these three steps as a starting point, you have a better chance at success. A successful outcome can make a significant contribution to the functionality of your organization. ■

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