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STRATEGIES

Why some people behave badly in the workplace

We often see survival-based behaviors — blaming others, rationalizing our mistakes, denial — displayed publicly by pro athletes, movie stars and politicians when they get in trouble. But these behaviors also can manifest themselves in the workplace when a manager or employee believes that their survival is at stake because their job, standing in the company or self-respect is on the line.

**MANAGEMENT**

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For the rich and famous, survival-based behaviors usually land them on the evening news. For the rest of us, the results are less dramatic. But they can be just as damaging to our careers, relationships and reputations.

So why do intelligent adults often behave in ways that leave colleagues scratching their heads and wondering, “what was he thinking?” The reality is that the person probably wasn’t thinking, but merely unaware they were reacting from a strong emotional state.

In the workplace, the problem can become more serious if a colleague or co-worker takes what was said as a personal attack. It can result in hurt feelings and frayed relationships that have a lasting effect on morale and productivity. It can send a team on the survival train to oblivion.

Unfortunately, survival behavior comes naturally to humans. Our ancestors fought for survival all the time. Finding food, clothing and shelter required their full attention all day, every day. Fear that there wouldn’t be enough drove day-to-day decisions and behavior.

Luckily, modern inventions such as the automobile, modern farming technology, airplanes, computers, robots and the Internet have made it possible for the first time for us to move beyond survival mode. Most of us can live our lives without fear that we will starve if we don’t get our next paycheck.

But old habits die hard. Despite modern reality, when we find ourselves under pressure, our survival instincts kick in. They can prevent us from choosing a different alternative — a set of behaviors based on accountability rather than survival.

- Survival behavior is driven by scarcity and fear. The belief that there aren’t enough jobs,

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money, brain power, time, or resources creates a me-against-you mentality when problems arise. This allows us to justify our survival-of-the-fittest behavior.

In this world, I believe that my problem is “you,” and you believe that your problem is “me.” To be successful, I must change your mind, manipulate or defeat you and vice versa.

- Accountable behavior is driven by abundance and resourcefulness (the opposite of fear). We still have challenges and problems to solve, but we operate from the point of view that there are enough jobs, money, time, brain power and resources to get the job done.

When problems arise in this world, it’s possible for everyone to win. Managers and employees work together in a collaborative context where mistakes and vulnerability are possible and even inevitable — but they occur in a safer, more open environment.

In this type of workplace, I can see that my problem is me and how I am thinking about or seeing the issue. In this safer environment, I can see that before I can address the problem between us, I first have to address the possibility that I contributed to the problem by making a mistake, interpreting poorly or failing to communicate.

This practice invites others to do the same, re-

sulting in greater collaboration and innovation.

You don’t need a psychologist to sort out all the bad behaviors that managers exhibit toward those they manage or that co-workers demonstrate toward each other. You can start making a difference by taking a few simple steps:

- Recognize when your own survival mode kicks in. If you see yourself behaving this way, take a deep breath. Ask yourself whether your survival is really at stake or if there is another way to look at the problem.

- Help others to recognize that survival-based thinking is behind most bad behaviors. Though these behaviors are deeply ingrained, patience and compassion can allow one to learn new behavior choices that produce more productive results.

- Understand that survival behaviors aren’t personal. The other person isn’t really out to get you, even if it often appears that way. He or she is just tangled up in their own web of past mistakes and decisions.

The late Buckminster Fuller, author of “Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth,” contended that humans arrived on our planet without an operating manual. This left us to learn by trial and error. In our ignorance, we made some fundamental mistakes.

One of these was the mistaken assumption that there is a scarcity of life-sustaining resources to ensure the health, happiness and prosperity of all humans on our planet. Only by seeing that we live in a world of abundance, Fuller said, can we begin to change the behaviors that prevent us from making progress.

Like using a typewriter when a computer is available, survival behavior is an inefficient way to operate. There’s a better behavioral technology that begins from trusting that we have enough money, jobs, resources, brain power and time.

Creating a workplace culture where it’s safe to be open, honest, direct, accountable and collaborative is the model for success for forward-thinking organizations.

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