

B = f (P, E)

how to approach personality problems at work

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Behavior = function (Person, Environment)

Our beliefs about what causes problematic behavior in others substantially impact our ability to influence change.

I discovered this by trial-and-error in my first years serving as an organizational leader. Faced with problematic behavior from someone, I would often see personality traits as the primary cause. As a result, I was usually pessimistic about the person's ability to change. This just increased my frustration and impatience. Ultimately, I either withdrew from communication or would try to "fix" the person in some way such as by giving negative feedback.

Finding ways to influence successfully

But, these approaches worked poorly and all too frequently provoked even more problematic behavior. At other times, I did have success influencing change. Gradually I realized that this success arose out of my finding a way to somehow believe in the person no matter how badly they were behaving. Instead of seeing personality issues, I would look for situational factors as the primary cause of behavior. I just assumed the person was under some stress or tension.

With this *situational* perspective, I was able to find more empathy and patience. Instead of trying to "fix" people, I would explore the situation with them to understand their goals and challenges. Frequently, this alone would lead to discovery of solutions which worked. At other times, I would still feel I had to give feedback but, because of my careful listening and desire to be of help, it felt more respectful and positive.

Why changing beliefs is so difficult

With these realizations, I set out to intentionally catch myself when I fell into thinking personality was the primary cause of problematic behavior and then shift my perspective. But, it was astonishingly hard to do consistently. On occasion, I would still find myself complaining about someone's personality.

But, I am not alone in experiencing difficulty changing perspectives. The belief that behavior arises primarily out of personal traits is an automatic bias we all have which psychologists call the fundamental attribution error. This bias is extremely powerful and seductive. To counter it requires strong, persistent vigilance.

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One important theory concerning our beliefs about behavior came from the social psychologist Kurt Lewin in the 1940's. He asserted that behavior (B) is a function (f) of two factors: a person's intrinsic traits and qualities like personality ("P"); and the impact of situational or

environmental factors (“E”). He was revolutionary at that time in observing that situational factors (“E”) have a far more dramatic influence than personality on how people behave and their ability to learn and grow. (1)

Over the years, many studies across diverse fields such as education, behavioral science, and management have shown results consistent with Lewin’s observation. (2) Studies have also indicated that our beliefs about people can actually become a key situational factor influencing their behavior. (2, 3) For example, in motivational counseling to change behavior, research has shown that people whose counselors believe they can change tend to do so. People whose counselors do not believe in them, do not do as well. (3)

Situations are usually workable

After years of work, I have learned to regularly pause to look at my beliefs especially if I notice impatience and frustration with someone. I have also found it helpful to assume that *the way I am behaving* as a result of my beliefs may be one of the situational causes of the other person’s behavior.

Using these methods, the large majority of behavioral problems turn out to be workable. I have seen astonishingly fast and unexpected changes. Sometimes things do not work out so well. But, by more consistently taking a situational perspective as opposed to focusing on personality, we can be more assured that our own beliefs have not been a cause of failure.

References

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About Neil Baker M.D.

Neil Baker M.D. works with healthcare organizations to enhance leadership and team impact through *In-the-Moment Leadership Strategies*. This means using any work situation, even the most complex and difficult, as an opportunity to achieve immediate impact on quality of work relationships and on progress toward results.

He has developed these approaches as a leader, speaker, consultant, and executive coach for 30 years. Past positions include serving as Director of Psychiatric Inpatient Services at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver, Colorado; Medical Director of Clinical Improvement at Group Health Cooperative in Seattle, Washington; and faculty and improvement advisor for more than twelve years for the Institute for Healthcare Improvement

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