Unexpected transformations of "personality problems" at work
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We've all dealt with people at work who cause us headaches due to difficult behaviors that appear to be deeply ingrained personality traits.

In the large majority of circumstances of such difficult behavior, I find that *situational* factors are the predominant driving forces—not personality traits or even lack of skills. Quite often, these situational factors are amenable to change.

What causes us to blame difficult behaviors on personality problems?

Psychological research has shown that attributing difficult behavior to fixed personality traits as opposed to situational factors (the "fundamental attribution error") is a pervasive and nearly automatic cognitive bias.

Despite my observation that most of us have strong values against labeling or blaming people, it is easy for anyone to fall into such biases in the midst of organizational pressure, complexity and uncertainty. Also, the infinite variety of human situations makes learning to counter these biases a life-long task.

With many years of leadership, I personally know the experience of occasionally falling into biases about people and allowing situations to stay stuck far too long. An outside point of view from colleagues or from an external consultant or coach can accelerate learning and change.

Client story #1: unexpected transformation of one year of difficult behavior

- **"Before" behaviors:** For one year after being hired, a staff member at a district office of 50 employees and managers continuously complained to everyone that his work was beneath him. He was demeaning to others and bad mouthed people behind their backs. Other staff complained that he drove them crazy. Eventually, a newly hired manager was assigned to be the man's supervisor. The manager asked me for help because she felt the problem had been "dumped" on her and was fearful of the burden.

- **Intervention:** It did not take long for the manager to realize what she needed to do. In her first meeting with the employee, the manager started by exploring the situation with him. She found out that multiple different managers had been giving him assignments with conflicting expectations. She said all assignments would now go through her. She described specifically the negative behaviors that he had to change. She set "huddles" with him twice a week to check-in on progress.

- **"After" behaviors:** In the first week, the staff member had a couple of negative outbursts. His manager was firm in saying this had to stop. After that, his negative behaviors indeed stopped. At my last update (six months later), this positive change had persisted. Other employees have been startled at the good work he was now doing.

Client story #2: unexpected transformation of 6 months of difficult behavior

- **"Before" behaviors:** A leader of a large regional quality improvement initiative in healthcare was upset at lack of progress over six months. He blamed this on a surgeon from one participating organization who constantly disrupted committee meetings by vehemently pushing his point of view and criticizing those who disagreed.

- **Intervention:** With coaching, the leader realized he had been argumentative himself in response to the situation. Also, there was not a solid, mutual agreement in the team on goals and norms for communication. In his next committee meeting, the leader expressed his concern about lack of progress and acknowledged his own contribution. He stated his desire for mutual understanding, goals and solutions and called for team norms. Everyone, including the surgeon, joined in and made progress for the first time.

- **"After" behaviors:** Recently, two years after this intervention, I followed up with the leader. The committee is still making progress with infrequent outbursts of argument. In fact, the leader and surgeon are now friendly and collegial.

Interventions that facilitate transformation

Not all changes are so quick and dramatic. More often, they take persistent work over time. When leaders are successful, their interventions vary but usually include:

- self-reflection to take responsibility for participation in the problem
- taking time with the person to explore the situation and find solutions
- identifying behaviors that need to change and, as needed, setting consequences
- providing clear goals and expectations and establishing norms for communication
- following-up regularly for mutual feedback about what is working and not working
- getting consultation and coaching if things stay stuck

Clients say the hardest part is usually the first step—the humbling nature of looking at one's own contribution to a situation. But, it is the key to unlocking one's best values and skills.

Remembering stories about unexpected transformations have helped myself and others counter the strong tendency to blame difficult behavior on personality. My hope is that unexpected transformations in the workplace will eventually become expected.

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