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WHAT LOOKS LIKE A DEFICIT IN "PEOPLE SKILLS"
MAY NOT BE

THE CASE OF THE 70 EMPLOYEES WITH BAD "PEOPLE SKILLS":

Early in my career, I was hired by an organization as a new manager to "clean-up" a work unit of 70 people mired for several years in destructive conflict and poor outcomes. Some senior executives considered the staff to be disruptive and felt many needed to be fired.

I was selected based on my history of turning around dysfunctional teams which depended in large part on my strong "people skills"--such as the ability to build trust, actively listen, resolve conflict, give or receive helpful feedback, and be collaborative. So, I started the job confidently.

BAD "PEOPLE SKILLS" CAN BE PROVOKED IN ANYONE--EVEN IN TEAM BUILDING EXPERTS.

The staff's common response to problems was to blame someone. In short order, they started to blame me--anything I said was often twisted into a reason to distrust me. It was hard to make progress. I began to think I might be the first to be fired. My growing distress and frustration undermined my "people skills". Negativism from staff provoked me to react with impatience and criticism. Staff would take such responses as validating their distrust.

For awhile, I did not accept that my own behavior made things worse. Instead, behind the scenes with other managers, I blamed the staff--"if *only* <u>they</u> were not such impossible people."

MOVEMENT FORWARD OFTEN STARTS WITH SELF REFLECTION.

Getting desperate, I hired an organizational consultant. He helped me get beyond my wounded pride to accept my humanness--the way conflict and stress diminished my team building skills.

Then I had to let go of blaming staff. That helped me take full responsibility for my behavior patterns. I learned to anticipate situations which were provocative for me. I was then better able to hold back my impatience and criticism and respond more skillfully. My good "people skills" became more consistent. Relationships with staff improved.

THE ROOT CAUSE OF BAD "PEOPLE SKILLS" MAY NOT BE IN THE PEOPLE.

My own personal changes were necessary but not sufficient to "fix" things. Many actions were required. But, the most impactful actions corrected a long absence of consistent authority. Repeatedly, I would make clear who had authority for which decisions. I also worked with staff to create clear role definitions and expectations. I assured these expectations by providing support and feedback.

Quite often, as I took such actions, employees who I had considered to be particularly bad instigators of conflict began to show consistent, "good enough" or even outstanding communication and collaboration--despite the *long-standing* nature of their problems.

By the end of two years, "people skills" in the staff were generally good, collaboration was high, customer complaints had dramatically dropped and we had turned things around financially. I actually can't remember a single staff member being fired over that time.

STRONG EMOTIONS AND CONFLICT OBSCURE ROOT CAUSES.

In a wide variety of work settings, I have seen systems problems, short term or long-standing, pull anyone out of his/her best level of "people skills". Besides lack of sufficient authority and expectations, common examples of other systems problems include time pressures, inefficient work processes, too much or inconsistent authority or too many priorities.

The good news is that we can learn to recognize particular situations which are provocative and rise above the turbulent emotional waters of bad "people skills". But, sometimes it does take an outside consultant like myself to help break the logjam of emotional reactivity.

UNEXPECTED TRANSFORMATION IS POSSIBLE IN DIFFICULT SITUATIONS.

Difficult situations on teams don't have to stay that way. Sometimes, unexpected levels of transformation are possible because the necessary "people skills" are already present.