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Project 'GLOBE'

By DR. DANIEL C. ASHLEY for the Daily Facts

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About two years ago, I wrote a column called "The Toxic Boss." In that column, I explained the options people have when they work for a boss who is "toxic." That is, a boss who is angry, controlling, meddlesome - or just plain mean.

After that column I received two questions in my e-mail. One asked how toxic bosses became toxic, especially when they seemed to be nice people before they were promoted into management. The second question asked if the traits of a high-quality leader were common in all human societies. That is, are the traits a good leader exhibits the same in Chin, as in the U.S.; the same in Mexico as in France, etc. The answers to these two questions are interrelated.

A few years back, I was fortunate to be involved in what was then called "Project Globe." Project Globe set about to determine if the characteristics of high-quality transformational leadership were universally endorsed. The study included 170 co-investigators (all Ph.Ds), and analyzed data from 65 different cultures. More than 17,000 middle managers located in 65 countries and 800 different organizations were studied. The analysis of the data took a couple of years, and the results were astounding.

Universally, in all cultures high-quality managers had to exhibit the same attributes. High=quality managers were universally found to be Trustworthy, Honest, Dependable, Just, Encouraging, Positive, Dynamic, Communicative, and Decisive. A few other attributes were also included. But key to leadership success were the first four mentioned. A manager/leader gets only one chance to be dishonest or untrustworthy - once he is labeled a liar, it is nearly impossible for him to change his reputation. And note: Communicative means TWO-WAY communication, not just boss to worker, but also worker to boss.

Project Globe went on to find the attributes that are universally negative. These attributes impede the ability of someone in a leadership role. Of course the amount of the impediment is related to the degree someone is infected by these negative attributes, and enough of any one of them is sufficient to derail a career. The attributes on this list include: Dictatorial, Irritable, Egocentric, Ruthless, Asocial, and Mean. So, if you have any of these traits in your leadership style, take the time to eliminate them before your career is damaged.

OK, now to the second question. Psychologists have a word for the way we reward ourselves. They call it "reinforcement theory." This is a fancy name for the simple idea that if something feels good, or creates a situation where you feel good, you are apt to repeat the behavior. This is why it is so difficult to keep your hands off the doughnuts when you know you need to lose weight. The immediate "reward" of the luscious doughnut is more powerful for some people than the future, poorly perceived reward of being thin.

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As a result, "just one doughnut won't hurt" thinking prevents many of us from losing weight. This whole concept is very important to understanding how nice, personable people become toxic bosses.

Imagine this: You have an employee who makes mistakes, so you take it upon yourself to punish that employee. After having a threatening conversation with that employee another manager approaches you and says something like, "Doing that was difficult, but you should know that you are a good manager for not letting the employee get away with it." You've just been rewarded for punishing an employee. You've just received an "atta-boy" for being mean. Remember, being mean was one of the negative attributes universally associated with leadership. Some managers make a habit out of being corrective and punishment-oriented. These managers become toxic and just plain mean.

This is not to say errant employees should not be corrected. Nor is this to say a manager should allow others to take advantage. However, for managers to sustain their own ability to lead, they must recognize taking actions which punish employees can cause the managers to become significantly less effective. As a result, managers who too quickly fall into punishment end up hurting themselves more than they end up correcting errant employees.

Sadly, punishments must be delivered from time to time. But doing so must be a manager's last resort. Jumping from counseling, coaching, educating and supporting to punishment too quickly can cause nice people to become toxic bosses. So, be aware of what you are doing to yourself on the long term, as you handle the day-to-day issues surrounding leading your employees.

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