

Workplace dysfunction: it's mommy's fault

It is a fact of psychological life that much of our behavior is based on how we were raised. So like it or not, we all bring parts of our biology and biography with us when we go to work - and that includes elements of our family relationships.

Many of our co-workers remind us of members of our families. So, we relate to them based on this often unconscious dynamic. Why?

As young children we learned to behave in ways that either brought us mommy's, daddy's and others' love, approval, and acceptance and/or kept us safe from harm, trauma or abuse.

Yet all children at some time or other feel hurt or traumatized by parents or primary caregivers who are doing their best, but who – however unintentionally - negatively affect the child in some way through their language, judgments, criticisms or emotional or physical reactivity.

For many children, their home environment was wrapped in a mantra of their "never being good enough". This dynamic holds true even in households where everything was just beautiful and loving and no one raised their voice. In childhood, wounding on some level is a fact of life.

As a result, the child grows up carrying an emotional make-up that translates into feelings that they are somehow lacking or not good enough. As the child grows into adolescence, they come to believe they need to think and behave in certain ways to protect their self from another's real or perceived disapproval and criticism or from verbal or physical harm.

Fast-forward to adult life at work and it's hardly surprising that folks unwittingly re-create this family dynamic. Cue adults often acting out their 3,4 or 5 year-old emotional selves, albeit in adult clothes and in adult bodies (especially those who insist, "Hey I am adult; I am mature, I am! I am! I am!...I'm not being emotional!").

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These adults often see bosses and managers as "mommies and daddies" and their co-workers as their siblings. It's not uncommon to witness workplace arguments, for example, that mimic family arguments and fights. It's not uncommon to witness workplace dysfunctional relationships, in-fighting and back-stabbing behavior that mimic sibling rivalries.

So when they encounter co-workers or circumstances at work that threaten their sense of emotional safety or that make them feel unaccepted or undeserving of approval and love, their knee-jerk reactivity is to do whatever it takes to regain this acceptance.

Consciously or unconsciously, their fear of rejection and disapproval can lead individuals to resort to lying just as children lie to avoid being punished or losing the love and acceptance they truly want and seek.

Often, when folks do personal growth and self-awareness work, they discover the ways they have worn masks and put on false personalities to cover up their feelings of inadequacy. They discover the "shadow side" of their personalities that serves as the oft-hidden driver of their negative reactivity and need to lie. They discover the self-sabotaging beliefs and self-images they created about themselves, about authority figures and siblings (now subordinates) as children and carried into adulthood.

Once folks see and understand this truth about why they are "acting out" and being defensive as adults, they begin to shed their self-limiting beliefs, their masks and their need to lie, to be fake and phony.

They begin to see the false self-images and allow themselves to "show up" as authentic, as their true and real self and feel free to "tell the truth" first, to themselves and then, to others.

From this place of emotional, psychological and spiritual maturity, a place where the "truth sets one free", folks move to a place of being real, a place they experience as refreshing and light, where honesty and trust are the foundational building blocks of their relationships.

In this place, people see no need for duplicity, disingenuousness, being fake and afraid. And, amazingly and refreshingly, they discover "telling the truth is not as bad as I thought."

As the expression goes, "The truth shall set you free." The deeper question is why so many at work refuse to allow themselves to believe that - truthfully.

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- When you experience conflicts at work, are they more professional or personal?
- Do personality conflicts remind you of earlier life conflicts with parents or siblings?
- Do you ever experience hurt, resentment anger or fear at work? Is it "professional" or "personal"? Are you really, really sure?
- Do personal issues interfere with your ability to work effectively with others? Are these "their" issues or "your" issues. Are you really, really sure?
- Do you have a tendency to take things personally? What would your friends and colleagues say?
- How have personalized assessments of others, or one another, affected your ability to resolve conflicts in your workplace relationships?
- You know you have "bad days." Do you allow others to have "bad days" as well? Can you spot ways you bring your "biology" or "biography" (i.e., your "family") to work?

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