

Organizational culture – unethical behavior and bad managers

In my mind, there are but two reasons (lots of excuses, however) managers behave unethically and/or inappropriately:

1. they are unable to behave ethically and/or appropriately, or
2. they are unwilling to behave ethically and/or appropriately.

Pure and simple.

The antidote for number one? Provide requisite, specific knowledge and hands-on experiential training, and short- and long-term follow-up and feedback to ensure ethical and appropriate behavior are "business as usual" and initiate consequence with teeth when it's not.

The antidote for number two? Well, this is a bit more complicated.

When one has the requisite knowledge and skills but acts counter, what's going on?

Two possibilities:

One is that the individual has chosen to behave otherwise because they fear – on some level – that behaving ethically or appropriately will result in some personal loss – lose of face, loss of friendships, loss or prestige, loss of a bonus, or perhaps loss of one's job.

It's not unusual for a manager to behave unethically or inappropriately of their own accord when driven, consciously or unconsciously, by their own fears.

On the other hand, a manager may choose to behave unethically or inappropriately because there is a covert, tacit or "unwritten rule" that such behavior is acceptable by others. This tacit agreement is known as collusion and often exists where there is a culture or subculture of collusion.

This type of collusion takes two (or more) - folks who co-opt their values, ethics or their true self to support their own and another's mis-deeds. Allowing another's collusion, by omission or commission, is a mid-deed! Think enabler.

When colluding or enabling collusion, we allow our self and the other person to run our respective unethical and inappropriate (as well as potentially self-destructive, self-sabotaging, self-limiting) behaviors in order to gain acceptance, approval, recognition, security (e.g. mental, emotional, physical, spiritual, psychological, financial, etc.) and the like - to feel emotionally and psychologically safe.

Collusion is saying (but not out loud), "I'm going to let you behave the way you want or need to so I can feel good about our relationship even though I know my behavior and your behavior are unethical, inappropriate, self-destructive, and out of integrity."

Collusion is behavior we commonly associate with "fraud." Workplace collusion is fraudulent insofar as one is living a lie and supporting another to live his/her lie. Colluding is "fraud" on a deeper level as it relates to who I am and how I am in my relationship with myself and with others. Think integrity.

What Does Collusion Look Like?

In the everyday "9:00 Monday morning" world, there are varied flavors of collusion. General expressions or behaviors that reflect collusion are:

- **Giving to get**
- **Your scratching my back and I'll scratch yours**
- **Going along to get along**
- **One hand washing the other**

We collude when we **support and pledge allegiance** to an unethical or incompetent leader, manager, supervisor, direct report or co-worker so we both can feel recognized, seen, and/or emotionally safe with each other. If I collude, the other(s) will appreciate my support and feel seen and I'll experience his/her appreciation, which allows me to feel seen and accepted or be "OK" in some way in this unethical and inappropriate (dysfunctional) relationship.

We collude when we **share insider information with only a select few** so I'll be viewed as caring about them and they will feel they're special. When I collude with them, I feel in control, and secure; they feel acknowledged that I chose them. We are being duplicitous and inappropriate in our actions of giving and receiving. Think narcissist or hypocrite.

We collude when we **verbally gang up on a third party** through bullying, sarcasm, or gossiping, experiencing a false sense of connection and camaraderie with our co-colluder at the expense of the third party.

We collude when we **withhold honest and forthright comments** about inappropriate behavior in a feedback session for fear of alienating another whose work we respect. By resisting the truth, and perpetuating another's false belief that his/her behavior is acceptable, we "play the game" of mutual respect while perpetuating our phony relationship of mutual "like."

Why Do We Collude?

Collusion is about lying to protect my and another's oft-fragile ego instead of showing up in integrity, from a place of honesty, sincerity and self-responsibility. The curiosity is why we collude.

We all experience a degree of deficiency – some more, some less. We all sense we are not "enough" or are lacking in some way. It's the human condition. However, we have two options in dealing with our sense of lack or deficiency:

1. We can choose to "work" on our colluding to understand it and our underlying motives for colluding, and take conscious steps to effectively reduce and eliminate it so we can show up authentically, in integrity, and self-responsibly. Or,
2. We can deceive ourself and ignore, deny, and resist telling the truth, hoping to keep our relationship with our self and with others emotionally intact; we ignore "the elephants in the room," – wearing blinders to what needs, ethically and appropriately, to be done said, heard, felt and seen - hoping that denial will "keep the emotional peace" and perpetuate the co-dependent or dysfunctional relationship.

The Basic Problem With Collusion

Collusion is a progressive drug – the need to lie and collude more and more to maintain the false feeling of emotional safety. When we collude, we are ever "vigilant," fearful with whether we will be "found out." We are constantly worried and concerned whether our co-colluder(s) will have a "conversion," fearing we'll be "outed." Colluding is exhausting, requiring an inordinate amount of physical, emotional and psychic energy, continually shoring up relationships that have no true foundation built on trust or truth.

The Antidote for Collusion

Colluding is corrosive to one's head, heart and soul. The antidote is twofold: to seek understanding of the reasons (excuses) why we refuse to tell our self and others the truth, and then set our intention to tell the truth when often we would rather resist. Truth-telling requires empathy, compassion, acceptance, strength, and courage. Behaving appropriately is freeing - mentally, emotionally, physically, spiritually and psychologically. Behaving ethically and appropriately allows us to show up authentically, honestly and in integrity. Behaving ethically and appropriately is the only way to experience true and real relationships with others.

Meaning, happiness, and true friendship most often appear as the top responses to the research question, "What's really important to you at work?"

Harvard Professor, Mary C. Gentile, in "*Giving Voice to Values: How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What's Right*," says that "one of the most powerful lenses through which to view values in the workplace - and one of the most powerful sources of the strength and confidence to act on those values - is the lens of self knowledge. A knowledge of oneself allows the crafting and embracing of a desired self-image. Managers at all levels in their firms report that a significant enabler of *values-based action* is the clarity, commitment and courage that is born of acting from our true center, finding alignment between who we already are and what we say and do." Think internal coherence and integrity.

Most folks say they want to experience "meaning" in their work, to behave appropriately and ethically, and align their life at work in the direction of "True North." Yet, many of these same folks find themselves conflicted every day – their values ideals and expectations up against those of the organization.

Simple, but not easy - you can't collude and expect to find real meaning, real happiness and real relationships at work. Thinking you can.....is the epitome of collusion and self-deception.

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- What keeps you from telling the truth at work? Are you afraid to tell the truth?
- Do you collude? If so, what are some ways you collude?
- Do you find yourself lying and being phony or fake to maintain specific relationships?
- Do others collude with you, not tell you what they think you need to hear, for fear of how you might react?
- How do you feel when you are in an experience when you know you are colluding (i.e., giving to get, going along to get along, etc.)?
- What's "right" about colluding? What does colluding get you? Is there another way to get that result without colluding?

I'm grateful for the opportunity to share this reading with you and I hope you find it insightful and useful.

Perhaps you'll share this with others, post it on a bulletin board, and use it to generate rich and rewarding discussion.

What is the one thing that is keeping you from feeling successful, happy, confident, in control or at peace as you live your life - at work, at home, at play or in relationship? Maybe you know what that "thing" is...maybe you don't. You just have a feeling that something has to change, whether or not you embrace that change. And how would that change support you to show up as a "better you?"

I'm available to guide you to create relationships that reflect honesty, integrity, authenticity, trust, and respect whether at work or outside of work. I support you to focus on the interpersonal skills that enable you to relate to others with a high level of personal and professional satisfaction - unhampered by personal inconsistencies, beliefs, "stories," and behaviors that create barriers to a harmonious, pleasant, conscious, compatible, healthy and productive relationship.

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