

AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP and the AUTHENTICALLY DIFFICULT EMPLOYEE

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Introduction

The transactional “How to Deal with Difficult People” model of leadership (carrot or stick) is not enough to change the core behavior of an authentically difficult employee. An authentically difficult employee is not criminal, evil, stupid, or crazy. This employee is someone who does not stop repeating undesired behaviors in the workplace after repeated applications of the stick and/or carrot. A leader can either keep carrotting and/or sticking the difficult employee until the bitter end, or the leader can try a different method. Authentic leadership is a positive, long-lasting method that works for both the difficult employee and the leader. As these two benefit, the institution will benefit, also. In contrast to rewarding or punishing, authentic leadership allows the leader of such an employee to:

- 1) empathize with
- 2) listen to
- 3) discover strengths of
- 4) model positive behavior with
- 5) support

the truly difficult employee by establishing a true relationship with the employee through transformational leadership methods. This will be an authentic relationship, not an attempt at manipulation until things improve.

Transactional Leadership

Conventional transactional leadership (carrot or stick) methods can and do work. They work best when the leader and employee are “on the same page” and the employee has not meet some agreed-upon standard. Transactional "leaders approach followers with an eye to exchanging one thing for another.... " (Burns, 1978 p. 4). A leader may use whatever “stick” the organization has chosen on the employee, and then offer the hope of a “carrot” when things improve. The leader may withhold a “carrot” until the employee changes; or the leader may use the “stick” until the employee changes. The carrot and stick method work as long as everyone agrees that it works.

He that complies against his will
Is of his own opinion still.

Samuel Butler, (1678) *Hudibras. Part iii. Canto iii. Line*

The Dilemma

Take an imaginary scenario: What do you do with an employee who has been through every Human Resources carrot/stick program for the past 15 years? Imagine that this employee has a personnel file larger and more well-documented than a dissertation. Imagine that this employee has reported to three different leaders, and despite the HR documentation, has received good yearly reviews. Imagine that this employee now works in a unit you have just been assigned to. Imagine some of the advice other leaders will give you, “Just wait until this employee makes a wrong move, go through the HR process one last time, and then fire him/her,” “Go in there and let him/her know you’re the boss,” etc., etc. The dilemma to this scenario occurs if you

believe the employee is not a piece of machinery to be refined and refitted or tossed out, and you believe there has to be a way to make positive change possible without anger, embarrassment, and constant supervision.

Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership provides a positive and sanity-saving method for addressing this dilemma. Through transformational methods, a leader "looks for potential motives in followers, seeks to satisfy higher needs, and engages the full person of the follower." (Burns, 1978 p. 4). The authentic leader stops viewing the difficult employee as an impediment to institutional progress, and instead begins to view the employee as a puzzle to decipher. This puzzle is a person who was hired for his/her skills and potential contributions. This person acts or reacts for reasons that are not found at the surface level. Developing a true relationship with this employee will take time and effort. The time and effort will be positive in nature, and both people will grow from the experience.

Conclusion

There are five important steps in this process of relationship building with the difficult employee. The steps may happen sequentially or not. The only rule to follow is to decide for yourself what success will look like:

- 1) Empathize with the employee, regardless of how you would have handled a situation if you were in his/her shoes. Accept that the employee's experiences and attitudes and feelings are genuine. Ask how the employee would have handled a situation had certain components changed. This encourages the employee to see alternatives.

- 2) Listen to the employee when he/she talks about non-work related issues, and learn what values are held or rejected. Do not judge the employee, just listen and learn. See if you can detect those values in play at work.
- 3) Discover strengths of the employee, and give him/her opportunities to be successful. This may require rethinking current duties. This step may also be perceived as a threat by other employees. They may wonder why you are “rewarding” a difficult employee (instead of saying, “Where’s the stick?”) and be resentful.
- 4) Model positive behavior with the employee. Do not fall into the “Do as I say, not as I do” trap. All eyes will be on the leader even more than before. This is the step where the true relationship building begins. The employee will begin to trust the leader when he/she sees that you are not manipulating him/her.
- 5) Support the employee when she/he starts making strides toward change. The changes may not be initially what are desired at first, but support them regardless. Believe that this employee can grow and fulfill the potential she/he showed when he/she was hired.

An authentically difficult employee, as stated before, is not someone who is evil, stupid, or crazy. Rather, it is someone who does not stop repeating undesired behaviors in the workplace. Assuming that the employee was competent when hired, the authentic leader can work to change the core behaviors of the employee. This can only be accomplished with the difficult employee’s full cooperation. Transformational methods of leadership take time and effort, and are not for the

faint-hearted. The positive results they bring, however, will benefit the employee, the leader, and the institution.

Citations

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