

leadership instalments

The Dandelion Effect

By Dan Gaynor

DO YOU KNOW THAT THERE ARE TIMES WHEN YOU are powerless to change another person's behavior? While the answer may seem self-evident, many leaders act as though there is always a way, when sometimes there is not. They limit their teams by accepting problem behavior for too long, hoping for a change that will never come. There are some things about each of us that just don't change - in many ways, we are who we are. We call these unchanging behaviors characteristic.

So let's define characteristic behavior more precisely: it is a predictable response to a given set of circumstances that resists pressure to change. There is good and bad characteristic behavior. Some people are characteristic achievers, they are driven to achieve in every situation. They are always highly valued employees. I've learned to look for patterns of achievement in resume's and interviews. Achievers are driven to achieve. On the problem side, I have worked with many leaders who had such an aversion to conflict that they couldn't bring themselves to correct subordinates when it was called for. This is clearly a serious shortcoming for a leader.

With characteristic behavior in mind, determining what can and cannot be changed is vital for every good team building leader. You must know who you can build with and who has to go. When you know problem behavior can be changed for the better, it makes sense to invest time in coaching. When you know change is not possible, coaching is a waste of time, you are better to accept the limitation and either live with the problem or make a change to the roster.

So how do you make the call reliably? Feedback again proves to be an irreplaceable leadership tool. When you see evidence of problematic behavior you point out the need for change through corrective feedback, then you watch for the response. If you point

out that aversion to conflict is a problem for a leader, as I have, and the subordinate you are working with can change, and wants to change, you'll see lasting improvement. If on the other hand, the behavior is characteristic, you will see brief improvement followed by continuous relapses. Three or four repetitions of the pattern - feedback followed by brief improvement and then relapse - is enough to be certain of characteristic behavior.



I call this pattern "The Dandelion Effect" - you keep pulling the head off but it keeps popping back up. The only way to deal with it is to dig it out by the root - take the individual out of the position. You are not doing anyone any favors if you don't deal with these situations. In the case of our leader who avoids conflict, you would be allowing him to stay in a role he cannot succeed at, and you would be disadvantaging the team he leads. They count on him to deal with issues as they arise. A leader who can't get comfortable with conflict is in the wrong job.

And you know what happens with dandelions when you don't dig them out - the root goes deeper and they spread. When you don't deal with someone who can't get along with others, or someone who can't stop gossiping, the behavior often deepens and spreads. These people deserve the opportunity to hear about and remedy problems. When they won't or can't - when they are characteristic - the leader must act. Use feedback to unveil characteristic behavior and then act when you find it and you are on your way to a stronger more satisfying team.

Discussion questions:

- 1. When was the most recent time you observed a negative characteristic behavior? What if any feedback was provided? What has the response been?**
- 2. Are there any problem situations that may be characteristic that you need to deal with today?**

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