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Anne Howard has written a series of informative articles on various HR topics. Looking for more information or need some help with these or other HR issues? Please get in touch.
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"Bad Behaviour" - by Anne Howard

"Get leave to work, for God in cursing gives better gifts than man in benediction."
- Elizabeth Barrett Browning

In two previous articles I talked about "bad bosses" and "bad employees". In doing so I mentioned that very often there are reasons beyond the individual boss and/or employee that result in bad behavior. People are likely to behave badly on an ongoing basis when two conditions exist: the behavior is accepted or is rewarded in some way. In other words, a systemic cause exists that supports the bad behavior. The following are some of the systemic contributors to bad behavior in the workplace.

Organizational Structure
The absence of a clearly defined and communicated authority structure leaves people wondering and without any sense of who has the authority to set the rules of the game. The biggest and meanest person in the game then has the freedom to assert his or her own authority.

Leadership
Leaders create the culture an organization will have and provide the examples for acceptable behaviour. The values and beliefs of the leaders are translated through the example they set into the culture of the organization. Strong leadership can substitute for formal structure. A formal structure can help to counter the detrimental effects of weak leadership. The absence of both provides fertile ground for bad behaviour.

Code of Conduct
Organizations with a clearly stated Code of Conduct provide a clear expectation for how people will behave within that workplace. When there are good positive role models exhibiting the behaviors that are consistent with the words, the potential for everyone to act in the manner expected increases.

Policies and Procedures
Along with a Code of Conduct, - the big picture perspective - the presence of policies and procedures that are consistent with the Code of Conduct provide a basis for good behaviour. Those policies and procedures (and the Code of Conduct) must be respected and enforced by the leadership and management of the organization. As soon as people start ignoring or avoiding dealing with violations of those two elements people know they are free to act in the ways that suit their own needs.

Situational Factors
Rapid growth, challenging competitive conditions, financial problems can all contribute to acceptance or tolerance of behaviour that might have been unacceptable in the past. Often the move toward acceptance of bad behavior is incremental – a tiny step at a time that results in a giant leap over time.

Another situational factor that can result in organizational tolerance for unacceptable behavior is staff shortages. This very common problem today can result in a tendency to let things slide for fear that staff might quit, leading to an approach to management that can best be described as the devil you know is better than any alternative.

A Perceived Absence of Fairness
Equity theory says that when there is a perception by people that they are not being fairly rewarded for the effort they extend, they will seek ways to obtain the rewards they believe they deserve. Organizations that do not treat people fairly are courting bad behavior.

What You Have is What You Get More Of
Culture is created by the action and interaction of people. When bad behavior is tolerated it establishes a culture of poor behavior. People act in ways their culture supports. Only when specific targeted action is taken to alter the culture will bad behavior cease. Once a pattern of bad behavior has been established, it will only disappear when the systemic cause has been identified and altered.

The work we do and the environment in which we do it contributes to who we are as human beings. When that work environment is a badly behaving one, every well behaving individual has to spend some of their energy dealing with poor behavior of others and on checking themselves to ensure they are behaving well. Those who don't want to waste themselves in that way will go elsewhere.