4 Bad Eggs and Bad Apples

Introduction

This chapter is about individualistic, person-centered explanations for CWBs. Some people – but fortunately very few – are, for want of a better theoretical and non-psychological term, evil. They are morally corrupt and capable of inflicting physical and mental pain on others. They are more than difficult or nasty or incompetent. Indeed, they are often more than simply bad. They appear to have criminal and psychopathic tendencies. Their lack of conscience and an absence of a sense of right and wrong make them able to inflict great harm on others without regret or remorse.

Three basic points need to be made. First, people commit CWBs because of the way they are treated and because of the workplace culture. This tends to explain the vast majority of CWBs. It is not that they start off bad, mad or sad but, rather, that situational, cultural and circumstantial factors drive them down that road in a vengeful way. However, there is a small percentage of serious CWBs performed consistently by individuals who are pro-active not reactive. That is, their own personality and values lead them to commit a strong CWB. The clue is in their personal history: bad eggs have a past, often starting in adolescence, which foretells how they behave as adults. Many are duplicitously dishonest and disingenuous. Worse, they are very aggressive or criminal in their everyday behavior.

Second, these bad eggs are relatively rare and, hopefully, screened out of most organizations. They do not, in general, reach senior levels before being “found out”; but some do, and cause great mayhem. Paradoxically, some exploit their pathology and succeed very well in climbing the greasy pole in organizational life.

Third, it is important to think dimensionally not categorically. Although we talk in categorical terms: he is a psychopath, she is Machiavellian, they are criminals, it is apparent that there are degrees of normality and abnormality; goodness or wickedness. Many people inhabit they gray areas between normal and abnormal, healthy and unhealthy, adapted and maladapted. Further, some, through stress or change, can “cross the line” between the adapted and the sick.

There are – and always will be – bad, conscienceless, psychopaths who commit serious and petty organizational crimes. We can explain their behavior primarily in terms of their pathology – but they are the exception, not the rule. They may be high profile in media stories but, mercifully,
very rare. They are, as statisticians say, a low base-rate phenomenon. As we have consistently noted, by far the most common motive for organization deviancy is the way people feel they have been treated by the organization.

Much has been written about the concept of the criminal personality: the idea that certain people are predisposed to commit crimes. How to explain lying, stealing and cheating at work? This section lists typical internal personal, “bad person” type explanations given by psychiatrists, psychologists, journalists and ordinary people who are victims or simply observers of “nasty” people in the workplace. While there are clearly occasions where the stealing, cheating and other CWBs are attributable primarily to the characteristics of individuals – namely, their personal pathology – it is nearly always the case that CWBs are not performed by “sick”, “deranged” or “wicked” individuals but, rather, by those who, for one reason or another, are pushed over the brink!

The wrong focus

Psychologists have noted the fundamental attribution error – which is, essentially, the idea that people like to explain the behavior of others by using personality trait, internal or dispositional causes rather than external or situation causes. Their attributions are erroneous: their belief in cause is misplaced. Thus, asked to explain why someone is frequently absent or has many accidents, they prefer to explain the former behavior in terms, say, of hypochondria or laziness and the latter behavior in terms of clumsiness or simply accident proneness. Most people ignore or underplay the many other external and situational factors that might play a role. Thus, a person may be frequently absent because of a dying parent or accident-prone because of poor factory layout, machinery or safety rules in an organization. There are, quite simply, both internal and external causes of behavior.

We often err in explaining others’ behaviors in terms of internal, stable dispositions like their personality, or moral integrity, or ability. We often explain our behavior in terms of the circumstances that shape, reward, constrain us, but others in terms of their personality. We, who are observers of other people, be they good or bad leaders and managers, tend to attribute (explain) their behavior as being primarily caused (motivated, shaped) by intrapersonal factors (that is, things about them). So, we talk of people’s ability, motives and personality as the primary shapes of behavior. They argue that we completely neglect to understand the situational forces that shape behavior. We make the error which is fundamental to so many explanations of neglecting the forces and factors that shape behavior.

This difference is immediately apparent when people are asked to describe or explain their behavior. For instance, a person gives a bad speech: observers say the speaker was nervous, insecure or unprepared while the actors (speaker) notes the bright lights, the audience hostility, the unfamiliar gadgets.