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Title:

Leading Bad Actors To Be Good Performers

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Summary:

Summary: Leaders are occasionally afflicted by "bad actors", those people who resist and may even sabotage the leaders' activities. Here is a five-step process for dealing with bad actors.

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A successful leader told me, "The biggest challenge I've had in my career is dealing with bad actors. Brent, do you have tips on how to do it?"

First, before we can deal with "bad actors", we must define the term bad actors. You already have a general idea of what the term means. You know I'm not talking about stage and screen actors but those actors you must deal with in meeting your challenges. A bad actor is a person who is not a part of the solution but is part of the problem. Every leader has to deal with bad actors now and then.

Look at it from the perspective of the 20/40/20 rule. When you have to lead others to meet a particular challenge, roughly about 20 percent of the people will be your ardent cause leaders in getting it done; about 40 percent will be on the fence; and about 20 percent won't do -- or at least won't want to do -- what is required. This 20 percent could be called bad actors.

However, being a bad actor can mean different things to different people. From your perspective, bad actors may mean the people who are resisting (or even sabotaging) your drive to achieve results.

On the other hand, their colleagues might not view them as bad actors but as employees who are standing up to unreasonable demands of your leadership.

Further: the "bad actors" may view their actions as heroic, and so wouldn't apply the label to themselves. In fact, most bad actors don't think they are bad actors. Your labeling them as such may prompt them to think YOU are a bad actor.

All this begs the question, why use the term at all? My answer: don't. Words like "bad actors" or "bad characters" can turn out to be self-fulfilling prophecies. At the very least, the people whom you are labeling may resent your attribution, at worst they may actually like it and purposely and proudly act the part.

Instead of calling them "bad actors", "bad characters", etc., I suggest you call them the "not-yets." They are "not yet" on your side. This designation avoids emotional value-judgments and helps keep communication open in your relationship with them.

However, make no mistake, you have to do something about the not-yets. The not-yets can be innovative, motivational leaders -- against you. Most want company; they need to validate their point of view by convincing others to join them.

There are three things you can do when dealing with not-yets. A. Accept them for what they are. B. Persuade them to change. C. Get rid of them. There is no fourth choice. Let's say, in a hypothetical case, that options A & C are unacceptable. That leaves B: You must persuade them to change.

Understand that there may be a continuum of persuasion: from simply neutralizing them (having them refrain from trying to enlist their own cause leaders against you) to having these leopards change their spots and actually become your cause leaders.

The latter occurrence can lead to great things happening in your organization; for when you convince not-yets to choose to be your cause leaders, you've not only gained cause leaders but you've also helped persuade fence-sitters to become cause leaders themselves.

Here is a process to deal with the not-yets.

(1) Define what constitutes each of the three groups in the 20/60/20 classification. For instance, "cause leadership" can be a determining factor. You will determine which group you think people belong in by ascertaining whether or not they are willing to be your cause leader.

(2) Identify what specific individuals go into each group as defined by the determinants: i.e., in this case whether or not they'll be your cause leaders.

For instance, you have 20 percent who are already your cause leaders. 40 percent fence-sitters who haven't made up their minds to be your cause leaders. And the 20 percent who are "not-yets" -- who may be trying to stop others from being your cause leaders.

(3) Describe the dynamic situation, where these people are tending to move at this point in time.

(4) Institute rewards for positive moments between groups and penalties for negative movements. You may want to reward fence-sitters for becoming cause leaders. And you may want to penalize fence-sitters who start moving toward the not-yet group.

(Make sure you differentiate fence-sitters from not-yets. Fence sitters have not made up their minds about whether they should be cause leaders. The not-yets, at least for now, categorically refuse to be cause leaders.)

(5) Isolate the not-yets. Leaving the not-yets alone may encourage them in their ways. So, you must make sure the not-yets pay a price for their choice. If you find you are expending an excess of time and resources trying to persuade them to join your cause, then isolate them. Recognize, however, there is a delicate art to isolating them. Attempting to isolate them too quickly or harshly can harden their attitudes against you and may rally other people to their side.

You can isolate them in three ways: (A) Through penalties -- making sure the penalties are fair and, equally important, are seen to be fair by others. (B) Through recognition -- making sure that they are known to others as being not-yets. (C) Through "a rising tide"-- making sure you celebrate your successes and use those successes to draw in more cause leaders, which will create a rising tide that can carry along even the not-yets.

(6) Measure and monitor your progress and theirs.

This process is not linear but a circle, more accurately a spiral. Keep working it.

Every leader is afflicted with bad actors. Make sure you avoid using the label and then use this process to neutralize their destructive influence and even turn them on to your cause. Who knows? You may turn bad actors into great performers.