



Two Sides of the Same Coin



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Double Standards at Work

In the last issue, we considered the well known phrase that *familiarity breeds contempt*; and discovered that this occurs only when our expectations are inappropriate to the strength of the relationship. Where our relationships are strong, we and those with whom we have them will not attempt to take advantage, but instead will work to maintain them.

Those of you who are familiar with this publication will know that my aim is to address a work-related issue from the perspective of both managers and employees; and so the problem of double standards at work is certainly *apropos*. I suspect, however, that when most people think of double standards, they mean that the standards to which they refer are applied unfairly; that what is considered acceptable for one person is simultaneously considered unacceptable for another. This certainly happens, and I've experienced it personally. You probably have, too.

There's another way that double standards might also be real or perceived. Many people are aware that the view of those from the top of an organization is often very different from the view of those at the bottom. For example, one of the most common differences of opinion has to do with morale. I've been in organizations as an employee and as a consultant where the managers thought morale was high, while the employees thought that it was low. I'll let you in on a little secret: I tend to believe the employees in these instances. They should know.

Although both of these perspectives are legitimate in their own right, I want to look at double standards in a different way – one which you may not be aware of. It appeared in some research I did a couple of years ago. I have to say straightaway that I was surprised by the results. Let me give you a bit of background.

The United Kingdom has a national health service (NHS). In fact, it's the largest employer in Europe. I surveyed nearly 200 managers in eight separate Trusts across the country. About half were male and the other half were female. Also, about half of them performed duties that were primarily clinical, while the other half were administrators.

The management structure of the NHS enables me to survey some of these managers twice, but in different roles. Most were surveyed as responding managers; that is, they were asked questions related to their perceptions of success or effectiveness in their capacity as *those who were managed*. Some of them were also surveyed as supervisors;¹ that is, they were asked questions in their role as *managers*. This is what I discovered:

The standards that the rating managers used to determine whether the managers they supervised were successful or effective were different from the standards they applied to themselves.

I hope you got that, but in case you didn't, I'm going to devote the rest of this month's newsletter to explaining this significant discovery and the implications it has for managers.²

Scholars have known for some time that all of us often hold others to a different standard than we hold ourselves. For all our apparent objectivity, we can always come up with mitigating circumstances to explain why we didn't perform according to our own standards, though we seldom give others the benefit of the doubt so readily. We've also known that what is considered rational behavior by one person is often considered irrational by another. Just think how often this happens between men and women, never mind between different cultures or different political persuasions. In a global workplace, the potential for similar problems and misunderstandings is endless. It is also true to say that people do not behave rationally all the time, or even according to their own values in every instance. No one is perfect. We all have lapses. But, we're not talking about how people behave occasionally. We're asking them what constitutes effective or successful management in their opinion; and what they've told us is that that depends on which hat they're wearing – whether it is the hat

¹ The research design prevented cross-contamination of the results.

² It's not my intention to insult anyone's intelligence. This was a very complicated study, and so I have simplified a very small part of the results here.

of the leader or the hat of the manager; the hat of *one who manages people*, or the hat of *one who is managed*.

Now let me clarify. (Warren) Bennis & Goldsmith³ have stated that leaders are concerned with overcoming circumstances, are interested in the long-term, exercise creativity and adaptability, focus on people, inspire trust, and *challenge the status quo*. Managers, on the other hand, give into circumstances, accept what they are told, focus on how to do things, and are concerned with enforcing existing policies and procedures: in a nutshell, to *preserve the status quo*. Obviously, leaders are expected to manage to some extent, and managers are expected to lead; but, in their primary roles one is seeking to change things while the other is responsible for keeping things as they are. I think that this helps to explain these remarkable results. Effectiveness (doing the right thing) is associated with leadership; but efficiency (doing things in the right way) is associated with management. Ask a leader a leadership question, and you will get a leadership answer. Ask a manager a management question, and you will get a management answer. Ask a leader or a manager a question that can be taken either way, and you will get an answer that is consistent with the role they believe they are filling at the time. This is profound stuff!

Let's consider a practical example. Suppose a leader has a goal of reducing customer complaints. He or she notifies a subordinate manager. The manager discovers that customers can't reach tech support on the telephone. The lines are always busy. What would a manager do? Remember, managers want to maintain the status quo. That means focusing on the bottom line, which means that putting in more telephone lines or hiring more people are not options. A leader would do that because that's what leaders do. They challenge the status quo. A manager, however, would be more likely to demand that staff reduce the length of time they spend on the phone with each caller, so that more calls could be handled by the same number of people within the same period of time.

Now, here's the kicker. How does the leader respond? That depends on whether that leader is expecting a leadership solution or a management solution. How does the subordinate manager respond? That depends on whether that manager thinks he or she is wearing the hat

³ Bennis, W and Goldsmith, J (1997). *Learning to Lead: A Workbook on Becoming a Leader*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing Limited.

of a leader or a manager. How does the organization respond? That depends on the underlying principles that govern decision-making. Look at the table below:

	Seen as Leader	Seen as Manager	Org expects leadership	Org expects management
Thinks as leader	Leader	Leader (2)	Leader	Leader (4)
Thinks as manager	Manager (1)	Manager	Manager (3)	Manager

The columns marked “Seen as Leader” indicate those occasions when the senior leader sees the subordinate as a Leader. “Seen as Manager” indicates when he/she sees the subordinate as a Manager. “Org expects leadership” means that the organization as a unit expects leadership behavior from the subordinate, and “Org expects management” means that the organization expects management behavior. “Thinks as leader” and “Thinks as manager” are the roles the subordinate believes he/she is filling. The red lettering indicates points of conflict.

The first point of conflict (1) occurs when the senior leader sees the subordinate as a junior leader, but the subordinate sees himself or herself as a manager. In this instance, the senior person would expect a leadership solution, but would get a management solution instead. The second point of conflict (2) occurs when the senior leader sees the subordinate as a manager, but the junior person sees himself or herself as a leader. In this case, the senior person would expect a management solution, but would get a leadership one instead. The third point of conflict (3) occurs when the organization as a unit expects the junior person to behave as a leader, but where the junior person sees himself or herself as a manager. In this case the organization would get a management solution rather than the leadership solution it wanted. The final point of conflict(4) occurs when the organization sees the junior person as a manager, but the junior person sees himself or herself as a leader. In this case, the organization would get a leadership solution instead of the management solution it wanted.

I hope you are still with me. I’m really not trying to make things any more complicated than is necessary. What I want you to see clearly are the potential points of conflict that are caused when senior and junior people, and the organizations in which they work have different expectations of what is effective or successful behavior.

I have heard those who are supposed to be leaders say something like, “when I told you to do such-and-such, I didn’t mean that you should do this-and-that!” In a former life, I was a weather forecaster in the US Air Force. I was supervised by someone who practiced this same kind of double standard. We routinely received weather maps that showed what was occurring and what was expected. It was the “what was expected” that this guy had the most trouble with. When we used our own judgment (a leadership behavior) and got it wrong, we were criticized for not believing the prognosis; but, when we used the prognosis (a management behavior) and got it wrong, we were criticized for believing it to be correct. Initiative (a leadership behavior) was only rewarded when it worked. When it didn’t work, we were expected to have adhered to the status quo. Not only that, but a culture had developed in our organization such that some of us were beginning to develop a similar approach to our work. Managers create the culture, but in time that culture can take on a life of its own.

The problem from the leader’s standpoint was that he had no objective standard for when we should have behaved like leaders or managers. Consequently, we received mixed messages from him. I suspect that he wrestled with these roles as well, not really knowing when to lead or when to manage. The point is that, having been told in different ways that we needed to both lead and manage if we wanted to advance in our careers, we never knew when to exercise one over the other. As a result, we had as much chance of getting it wrong as we had of getting it right.

Let’s state the obvious right here and now: Not all leadership behaviors work every time and under every circumstance. The same can be said of management behaviors. There are just too many variables. For example, the received wisdom for maintaining optimum health is to exercise four or five times per week for 30 minutes. Flu season, as you all know, is just around the corner. So, suppose you exercise the recommended number of times per week, but you still get the flu. Does that mean that you stop exercising for the rest of your life because you got sick? Of course not. People get sick. It’s part of life. Regular exercise is still good for you, and it can help to build up your resistance so that you remain healthy more often than not; but it will not keep you from getting sick in every instance. What about flu vaccinations? Should we stop giving them because sometimes they don’t work as well as we had anticipated? If we did, we could have a pandemic similar to the Spanish Flu which killed

millions of people between 1918 and 1919 including almost 700,000 in the United States alone.

If we are to avoid having double standards, then we must decide what our objective standards will be. Whichever ones you choose, they are the ones that are “carved in stone” – against which all others are compared.

The problem with all of this, of course, is that we’re geared for results. No one cares how hard we work; they only care about the results we get. While this is as it should be, in my opinion, the results we get must also be consistent with our principles – our values, if you prefer. If our principles vary according to our results, then we will only confuse our customers, our subordinates, or even ourselves; and when that happens, failure cannot be far away.

On this two-sided coin, our principles must drive our results; but more than that: The criteria that we apply to others, we must also apply to ourselves. If we don’t, then as managers, we will have justly earned our reputation as being double-minded – as those who exercise double standards.