

THE TROUBLE WITH *Sally*



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DON'T SHOOT THE MESSENGER —

That surly malcontent may signal deeper problems in your organization

For hundreds of years, coal miners have faced a silent and deadly enemy. Each working day they venture into the mines, aware that if they unsuspectingly stumble on a pocket of odorless and invisible methane gas, they may well perish from lack of oxygen or a blast ignited by the smallest sparks from their tools.

In many ways, instances of workplace conflict — dysfunctional communications, authoritarian management, aggression, backstabbing, disrespect, office politics and similar critical issues — are the methane gas of the modern workplace. These toxins quietly poison the environment, creating increasing levels of conflict that threaten to smother a productive workplace if nothing is done to alleviate the situation, or explode at the most minor of events.

Cases of workplace conflict can be further complicated by collective attitudes towards a single employee. Often, people in a given workplace will point to one or more individuals as the primary source of all problems facing the group, labeling those individuals as “troublemakers”. Once the group has identified a troublemaker, it becomes easy to conclude that the solution to the problem lies in getting rid of the employee. Indeed, that answer is so tantalizingly available and simplistic that it is difficult to avoid.

THE MINE

An HR staff person in a large corporation recently called our consultants for help. The situation that he described was a familiar one: a large work group within the corporation had been experiencing interpersonal difficulties over several years.

To outsiders, the situation was mind-boggling: otherwise competent and mature adults were unable to put aside personal feelings in order to get their work done. Things had deteriorated to the point where seemingly insignificant issues resulted in a total breakdown of communication for weeks at a time.

Not only was the work group's productivity suffering, but people were avoiding coming to work and were talking about quitting. At the center of it all — at least according to others in the workplace — was an administrative assistant. We'll call her Sally.

TALKING ABOUT SALLY

“I used to love my job, but everything's changed over the last year or so. We've got a really bad situation in our workplace now. This one employee, Sally, is a problem — a troublemaker. She can't seem to work with anyone for any length of time without totally alienating them. To some, she is demanding, combative, insensitive and rude, even to her superiors. She totally ignores others.

No one does anything about it; they just try to stay out of her way. But it has had a terrible effect on things. Our team has broken down, and everyone seems to have divided into factions; people are ignoring each other, gossiping about each other, and actively trying to undermine each other. We can't even seem to look at each other, let alone sit in meetings together or have lunch together like we used to. This all seems to have originated with Sally; she's at the center of it all. I heard that she was a troublemaker at her previous job, too.

I don't know how much longer I can stand it. I wake up every morning and dread going to work. For some time now I've been seriously thinking of quitting.”

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MEET THE “TROUBLEMAKER”

Sally is not unique. We have all known a Sally, or her male equivalent, in our workplaces. For whatever reason, she is the one to whom almost everyone else would point if asked to identify those who don't fit in.

She refuses to be part of the team. She seems in constant conflict with one or more people around her. She seems to stretch the goodwill of even the most patient and well intentioned.

Gradually, Sally becomes the object of widespread frustration, the topic of angry discussion, the subject of gossip colored by derogatory comments. In our exchanges with others, we come to explain her behavior and our own bad feelings by referring to her distorted personality, her damaged psychology, her impaired cognition, or her mean spirit.

TOXICITY THAT AFFECTS EVERYONE

Most of us can also relate to the continuing state of generalized frustration, anger and confusion that surrounds Sally. We have felt the gut twisting anxiety of having to go to work each day in places that seem in some way poisoned by the way a “troublemaker” relates to others. We have all wished fervently that someone would either make the person behave, or get rid of him or her. In this case, it is equally true of those who supervise Sally as it is of her peers. Yet nothing changes.

CANARIES IN THE MINES

We need to identify critical workplace issues before we can respond to them. However, these issues often present themselves in ways that are difficult for us to recognize or articulate, particularly when we must focus intently on accomplishing all the tasks associated with our positions. We may even push our awareness of certain workplace issues away by normalizing or minimizing them, or by rationalizing our lack of active response.

Miners use gas detection instruments to alert them of toxins in the air, but in the past they used live canaries which died instantly at the first sign of methane.

Wouldn't it be convenient to have a clear alarm signal — like the canaries in mines that used to keel over at the first sign of danger — to warn us of problems in the workplace?

Of course, we don't have canaries that will alert us of potentially problematic issues in the workplace. Or do we?

GOOD NEWS

The troublemaker is, in fact, often the “canary” in the workplace. Whether by reason of personality, psychology, cognitive capacity, or simply her increased exposure to workplace issues in relation to others, Sally's problematic behavior may be both a cause of conflict, and a result of it. In other words, Sally may be acting as an early warning system for the presence of significant yet otherwise unrecognized Workplace issues. Her behavior may be equivalent to the canary collapsing.

In Sally's case, her problematic behavior was partially a response to her resentment over her perceptions that, despite being otherwise bright and capable, she was constantly being micro-managed and talked down to by her superior. She was painfully aware of having seen her manager lash out at other employees, some of whom had later quit or been let go. She had also heard the manager give poor references when called by prospective new employers. Because the manager only engaged in such toxic behavior selectively, when his peers and superiors were not

PEOPLE PROBLEMS HAPPEN FOR A REASON

■ Be on the lookout for recurring themes in problematic situations — Who's involved? What are the complaints? What are the behaviors? What are the effects?

■ Be aware of the "we just can't find good people" syndrome — it may be true that everyone who applies for a job with your organization (or for a particular position, or in a particular work group) is inherently under-motivated, incompetent, malcontent, and unable to work in a team, but is that really likely?

■ When faced with a problem situation, avoid psychoanalyzing in the first instance. Instead of trying to work out what is wrong with the person who seems to be acting badly, start by asking

yourself what things in the workplace might be making otherwise good people act unhelpfully.

■ When people start to talk negatively about an employee, sit up and take notice — something needs to be done.

■ Ask what happened and why, how people have been affected, and what needs to happen to make things better.

■ Hold the team or group accountable for doing what needs to be done to make things better.

■ Evaluate workplace performance and systematically explore opportunities to improve in at least the following areas:

- operating procedures, work instructions;

- communicating, sharing information, acting on feedback, providing feedback;
- team meeting effectiveness, documented outcomes and actions implemented;
- internal measurement and business performance reports;
- business vision and plan;
- individual accountability, initiative;
- quality assurance, performance standards and expectations, performance appraisal;
- client relationships;
- manager/supervisor consistency between words and actions; and
- consistent application of rules and expectations.

around, he continued to enjoy the widespread support of the other management personnel. Sally knew that people were much more inclined to view her as the problem than him. She felt powerless to address the issues that were critical in defining her experience of the workplace.

Sally's poor behavior on each of these various occasions, while definitely unacceptable and requiring a response was also a warning sign that critical issues existed and needed to be addressed in her workplace.

The difficulty for us in recognizing, valuing and dealing with Sally as the workplace canary is that it's easier to focus on the harm that she causes without apparent provocation. It seems difficult to take into account that Sally's apparently irrational or anti-social behavior may in fact be a perfectly rational response to her experiences and to circumstances about which we have very limited knowledge.

Sally was definitely guilty of problematic conduct, to which a response was required. At the same time, she was heavily influenced by her manager's problematic behavior, and her own sense of powerlessness in the face of such behavior. Her co-workers and manager also contributed to Sally's continued engagement in problematic conduct by failing to engage her immediately and effectively in response. In order to address the situation fully, we needed to grasp and deal with all these factors together. We needed to understand and relate to the rich complexity of the circumstances.

FAILING TO DEAL WITH THE CANARY — AND THE METHANE

In workplaces that lack effective mechanisms for recognizing and addressing breakdowns in relationships, colleagues and supervisors of the troublemaker typically throw up their hands, and look to more senior managers to deal with the situation. In the meantime, they avoid the troublemaker as much as possible, though they sometimes are driven to act inappropriately by their distress over that person's behavior. Managers in such environments are in an equally difficult situation as the troublemaker's peers, as they tend to be no better equipped than their subordinates to confront and deal with behavior that disrupts workplace relationships. Certainly, they can have the power to invoke disciplinary procedures, but we know instinctively (if not from direct experience) that

such responses are more likely to exacerbate the situation than make it better. And we are right.

In Sally's case, we see reluctance on the part of her manager to even consider discipline in response to her behavior. Looked at in isolation from other incidents and the overall effect on the workplace, the "offenses" of which Sally is guilty appear insufficient to warrant such response. It is difficult to conceive of a manager feeling confident and self-assured while telling Sally that she is being disciplined for looking at someone else disdainfully, or using a condescending tone, or intentionally ignoring someone. Certainly, no effective union representative would allow such a situation to go unchallenged.

Instead, Sally's manager chose to ignore specific instances of problematic behavior, even if they occurred in front of him. The manager dismissed or minimized complaints that other employees brought forward, an approach that created more difficulties in the workplace's web of relationships.

At the same time, the manager responded by targeting Sally out of frustration and anger over the unaddressed behavioral issues. He started to look for any legitimate excuse to be tough on her. He searched for and found reasons to rebuke and ridicule her, all the time avoiding discussions of the specific behaviors that ignited the fire of resentment in the manager. The thought of firing her was never far from his mind.

As a consequence, in Sally's workplace, we see both peers and superiors engaging very indirectly with Sally regarding her difficult behaviors. They do not confront her on the spot or raise the issue constructively.

Instead, they avoid her, or strike back, or both. We see a cycle of reactive behavior, driven by resentments over previous instances not directly related to the moment. We see the emergence of a shared if unspoken idea for a solution: that of terminating Sally's employment. In the meantime, the group fails to share valuable information and thus cannot fully appreciate how the manager's behavior contributes to difficulties at all levels of the relationship network.

KILLING THE MESSENGER

The process of labeling and targeting people as problem employees or troublemakers is not helpful. It seduces us into engaging in ill-considered responses, and denies us opportunities to identify contributing factors that will remain long after the troublemaker is gone. It facilitates a self-perpetuating cycle of hiring and firing, due to the constant emergence and escalation of reactive behavior. It fosters cynicism by employers about their employees, and an authoritarian approach to management.

Instead of simply seeing Sally as the problem, we need to see her behavior as both a problem to be addressed, and a clue that something more may be wrong in the workplace. Responding appropriately to these two aspects of Sally's behavior requires that we engage in a process of group learning, by sharing relevant information about what happened and why, how everyone has been affected, and what needs to happen in order to make things better. Such a process will allow us to formulate effective and considered responses to difficult situations.

The alternative: brush up on your managerial skills.

If all this sounds like a lot of work as compared to just jettisoning Sally, it is. And it should be. Managers look to their subordinates to fulfill their job duties completely and competently. Those subordinates expect no less from their managers. As managers, we can't escape the organization's need for us to exercise our own responsibilities by actively managing difficult situations in a timely and meaningful way. Describing and responding to complex situations in overly simplistic and authoritarian ways, while tempting in the short term, leads to inevitable problems in workplace relationships in the long run.

It is possible that Sally's inappropriate behavior may be entirely due to her personal attributes, and independent of any other workplace issues. Certainly there must have been times that miners have taken "problem canaries" into the mine, those afflicted with disease, congenital weaknesses, or other conditions that might cause them to collapse for reasons unassociated with methane gas. Still, the potential results of tossing a collapsed canary from the mine without actually checking for the presence of methane are clearly apparent.

The lesson: In the mines, if the canary keels over, don't simply label it as faulty, toss it out and return to work. Instead, stop and check for the presence of methane gas. Respond accordingly. Similarly, if an employee engages in problematic behavior, don't reflexively label the person as a problem or a troublemaker and start dismissal proceedings. You could be killing your messenger

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