Once again, history is repeating itself. The chain of events that have come to light at Penn State on how individuals reacted to Jerry Sandusky’s reported behavior with kids, reinforces the power and danger of a dysfunctional organizational culture. Sadly, we’ve seen other examples recently of organizations where the culture dictated that you turn a blind eye to illegal, unethical and/or immoral behavior in order to maintain the status quo, protect the perpetrator of the act and the organization’s reputation. The Catholic Church’s cover up of pedophile priests, Enron, the Atlanta School District’s cheating scandal on standardized testing, Bernie Madoff’s Ponzi scam, the “Fast and Furious”debacle - these are some that made the news. Meanwhile, the real victims of events like these are further victimized by the politics and political spin that is put on the truth by the internal spin-masters.

Events like the above cause us to rehash the facts and time line in order to piece together a picture of how things happened and eventually, understand the rationale as to why individuals chose to ignore or suppress the warning signs. While there is great emotion, outcry and “second guessing” of what could have/should have been done in hindsight, the eventual facts paint a picture of the type of culture that allowed the events to evolve from a series of ripples into a full blown tsunami, destroying not only the lives of the victims, but many others in its far-reaching path.

While you might not be affected by major scandals such as the above mentioned, most organizational cultures are dysfunctional to a certain degree. In every culture, there are questionable to unacceptable behaviors occurring each day that people turn a blind eye to in order to protect themselves, their position and/or the organization. Stop for a minute and think -

* How do individuals get hired or promoted in your organization?
* How does one get status in your organization?
* Who is related to whom in your organization?
* Who is intimately involved with whom in your organization?
* What kind of double standards exist for favored employees versus regular employees?
* What is some of the gossip you hear at the water cooler each day?
* How do things really happen in your organization? What should happen?
* What would happen if someone challenged a negative act being modeled by a status member of the organization?

The common denominator that has determined the quality of every organizational culture in the past, does so today and will continue to do so in the future, is quite simply, human nature. After 37 years in the field of organizational culture change, allow me to present my take on human nature, the cultures we create and how to fix them.

**HUMAN NATURE**

What I have learned about human nature can be summed up via the following points:

1. **The Three Constants**

   **A. Human beings make decisions based on meeting their self-serving agendas.**

   There is nothing wrong with wanting the best for yourself or your family, or in reaping rewards for having developed and used your God-given talents to attain things in life. However, the decisions one makes regarding how to fulfill those wants/needs can cause conflict and affect the delicate balance between self and others.

   **B. All evidence is self-serving to the beliefs of the individual interpreting it.**

   At one time the earth was flat and blood-letting was the established medical procedure for curing many of man’s medical ills. As mankind progressed, many of the established beliefs that held true for a particular time period gave way to new ways of thinking based on new discoveries, innovations, experiences, facts and logic. As things changed, individuals were free to form their own opinion on things based on the logical or illogical beliefs they learned. These beliefs then manifested themselves through one’s behavior. Thus the equation:

   

   \[ \text{Stimulus} + \text{The Belief} = \text{The Behavioral Response}. \]

   This is the same process that we, as human beings, use today in assessing our environments to fulfill our self-serving needs. However, the problems arise when we all see the same stimulus, but judge it differently according to our particular belief. Our belief will then determine our behavioral response to the stimulus.

   For instance, what one-word adjective describes your belief about money? Some might say power. Others, security. Still others see money as evil. Logically, if you see it as power, your behavior will focus on defining ways to amass as much as possible to feel powerful. If money is seen as evil, you will shun it and perhaps fault others for having too much? Conflicting beliefs regarding the same stimulus breeds the divisive “I’m right and you’re wrong” mentality.
Part 1: Human Nature and The Cultures We Create

C. “Stupid is as stupid does.” (and says!) - Forrest Gump

So, on the basis of the logical or illogical conclusions according to what an individual has experienced or learned, and believes about a certain stimulus, an individual chooses to act out certain behaviors. Some individuals, by virtue of their beliefs, choose to behave in a manner that is, at times, contradictory to the acceptable ways of doing things.

Groups, organizations and society have behavioral parameters, or rules, that outline what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior for its members. In field of law, the standard is what a reasonable man would do. Facts, common sense and logic are other means through which one can assess a common standard for acceptable behavior. When one’s behavior defies the application of reason, common sense, logic and/or facts, beware - the person is totally incompetent or is deliberately choosing this course of action to attain a self-serving hidden agenda, possibly, at your expense.

So, in attaining one’s self-serving agendas, man must define the motivating factors that will guide his behavior in moving him forward in pursuit of fulfilling his needs. The order in which he ranks each of these Ps will determine his behavior. The Five Ps are: power, purpose, politics, principles and profit.

2. The Five Ps

1. **Power** - This is acquiring some degree of control over another by virtue of one’s position.
2. **Profit** - The quest to amass as much money as possible.
3. **Politics** - Playing the political game to gain status and survive in the group.
4. **Principles** - Tenets that guide you to do the right thing.
5. **Purpose** - What you feel you are called to do in this life.

How people prioritize these is a reflection on what is important to them and can give insight into their pattern of behavior. While our schools and religious institutions teach us formal principles to live by, we soon learn that these principles give way to profit, power and politics in the real world. Without an ethical compass to guide one’s behavior, man will use whatever means necessary to achieve his purpose - even if it leads to his own self-destruction or the destruction of others.

3. The Patterns We Develop

Every human being has a pattern of behavior. This pattern defines who you are as a person and provides some level of consistency for how you behave on a daily basis. Although human behavior is not always predictable, most people are pretty consistent in their behavioral patterns.
Rod Hess - Normative Leadership - Helpathy.com

We assess people according to their individual strengths and developmental areas as a person. We use adjectives to describe what we observe in the individual model on a consistent basis. These adjectives run on a spectrum from kind, hard-working, confident, honest, and responsible to indifferent, cranky, selfish and hurtful. Our beliefs and experiences shape our patterns and we take these patterns with us wherever we go.

These patterns are formed in our childhood and are largely influenced by how we are parented. The cycle of what our parents were taught by their parents, is passed on to us, and we in turn, pass on certain beliefs and values to our children. And, the cycle continues with our children passing on to their children what we taught them. Some parenting styles spawn happy, confident children who learn to navigate the harsh realities of the world around them. Whereas, other styles give rise to children whose social baggage continues to perpetuate the dysfunctional idiosyncracies of human behavior at all levels within society.

● THE CULTURES WE CREATE ●

With our pattern of behavior formed, we seek to associate with others with whom we share a common bond or purpose. So, we might form a group. As the membership grows, the group shifts from a grass roots movement to a more formal, structured organization. A formal system defining the leadership, rules, policies, etc., is adopted to provide structure, discipline, control and order within the group.

Some groups or organizations we join have already been in existence and are well established. They have a formal system of rules that outline what is supposed to happen. They also have an informal, normative culture that dictates how things really happen around here. These informal codes of behavior are called group norms. The collection of both positive and negative norms within a group defines the informal culture.

By definition, a group norm is a behavioral expectation that most group members are expected to conform to in a given situation. Group norms can be either positive or negative. However, there are some norms that fall into that “gray area” where they are not overtly positive or negative, but, they exist and have a neutral impact upon the group. When identifying a norm, it is helpful to use the preface, around here, most people are expected to, and then describe the specific behavior.

Group norms are difficult to read, but one feels varying degrees of peer pressure being applied by the group to conform to the normative expectation. When peer pressure is being applied by the group on a member to conform to an expected behavior, the individual is in what is called a norms crisis.

Sometimes, an individual caught in a norms crisis might be expected to reinforce a negative behavior that is contrary not only to the formal rules, but also to the individual’s value system.
When this happens, the individual must then choose between following the rules and doing *what is right,* or doing what the peer group expects. So, when faced with a norms crisis, an individual must choose a course of action. There are three:

1) Approve and support the behavior.
2) Disapprove and question/challenge the behavior.
3) Approve or disapprove, but do nothing. (“Turn a blind eye”)

For instance, let’s say the norm, *around here, most people are expected to turn a blind eye to inappropriate behavior,* exists in your organization. When inappropriate behavior is noticed, if you approve and support it, you will reinforce it in some way and challenge others who might speak out against this practice. If you disapprove and question it, you are doing the right thing. However, you are a threat to the group and the degree of peer pressure applied to you is proportionate to how threatened the group is regarding potential consequences for having this behavior exposed. In extreme cases, these individuals are labeled *whistle blowers.* They demonstrate the courage to expose the collusive acts. However, despite doing the right thing, they can be subjected to an intense smear campaign by others who deliberately manipulate the truth. Consequences can range from a loss of status, isolation from the group, loss of their job, and character assassination to lawsuits, incarceration and even death.

Choosing option one or two is demonstrating leadership. You are taking a position and overtly asserting yourself so the group knows where you stand on the issue in question. So, when group members observe inappropriate behavior, they should challenge/question the perpetrator by saying, “Excuse me, but, we don’t do that around here.” The level of intervention, style used and potentially, the consequence for the behavior, is initially in the hands of the person challenging the behavior. Ideally, a good leader will reinforce the positive expectations of the group and challenge or question any negative behaviors being modeled by group members on a consistent basis.

Several questions arise when determining *when* to question behavior:

* Since all evidence is self-serving to the beliefs of the person interpreting it, who determines when a behavior is deemed acceptable or unacceptable?
* Once you challenge the behavior, what do you do next?
* Are you willing to accept the consequences that may impact you as a result of your leadership?

In option three above, turning a blind eye, you may agree or disagree with the normative expectation, however you choose to do nothing to either reinforce it or challenge it publicly. Instead, you will talk about the incident privately among your trusted peers and possibly family relatives who are not members of the group. You may assert your feelings with your peers in private regarding what *somebody* should do, but you will refrain from doing what needs to be
done to keep the status quo and not make waves for yourself (protecting your interests) or the group.

Option three also gives rise to a collusive cover up mentality by group members/leaders in order to spin and/or manipulate the facts to protect the image and stability of the group. While this strategy may succeed in the short run, the truth always comes out at some point in time and it casts an even greater negative image over the group for having deliberately misled others. It also casts a cloud of suspicion over the individuals who perpetuated the lies. It totally destroys any trust level that may have existed prior to the cover up.

One’s choice in responding to the norms crisis will determine the individual’s ability to survive, belong and gain status within the group. Each choice has its advantages and disadvantages for both the individual and the group.

Group norms originate in two ways - 1) necessity and, 2) by the modeling behavior of a status person in a group. Sometime situations occur that are out of our span of control and we are forced to change the way we do things. We don’t like it, but we reluctantly adapt to the new way in order to survive and move forward. After the initial resistance to the new change, we get used to it and the new behavior, over time, eventually gains acceptance within the group and becomes the new norm for how we do things in the group.

Leaders, by virtue of their formal position, have power over the group members. The behaviors that are modeled by the leader are many times emulated by the group members. They rationalize: if it’s OK for the leader to do, it must be OK for us to do it. Logically, this makes sense. Remember, as the leader goes, so goes the group, and so goes the culture within the group. When the cultures are out of balance, myriad problems will arise. There are three basic cultures that leaders create within their groups:

In the culture in figure 1, the needs of the group are more important than those of the individual. The “we know what is best for you” mentality prevails. Individualism is frowned upon by those who lead the group. Those individuals who do strive to use their God-given talent to improve themselves through hard work and sacrifice, must share the fruits of their labors with those who are unwilling, for a variety of reasons, to use their talents. Consequently, members embrace an entitlement mentality and feel they are owed something for nothing. This destroys initiative and creativity is stifled. In this culture, the norm is to reinforce the status quo and adopt a normative expectation that forces members to conform to lower standards of productivity and accountability.

To maintain this type of environment, leaders direct their enforcers use intimidation and other
Part 1: Human Nature and The Cultures We Create

strong-arm tactics to control the members. The flow of information is closely monitored and the leaders’ spin-doctors twist the facts to make them fit the message they want to report. Individuals who “see through” the deception and have the courage to question these facts receive varying degrees of peer pressure to conform to the norms. This philosophy can be seen in political ideologies such as socialism and fascism. Unions adopt this group mentality which unfortunately, stifles individual initiative, reinforces sub-par performance standards and protects workers who perform at levels far below their potential. Gangs and cults are other examples of cultures where individuals sacrifice their individuality in order to conform to the whims of the leader/group. Although this model is out of balance, it can be useful to a leader.

A leader who is charged with turning around a negative culture in a group or organization will initially use this model to bring order, discipline and structure to the group. The needs of the group will supercede the needs of the individual in the early phase of the group’s development. This phase is called the control phase. While this approach is out of balance, it is a necessary, strategic move by the leader in order to set the normative expectations of the group because the group is incapable to doing so for itself. The other extreme in group/organizational cultures can be seen in Figure 2.

Here, the needs of the individual are more important than the group. In this environment, there is little to no teamwork. “Looking out for #1” is the expected behavior. Sometimes the superstar syndrome evolves where individuals believe they are more important than the team. Although they are part of a team, it’s all about them. Self-centeredness and/or self-survival is the primary objective. I want what I want - even if it is at your expense is the attitude.

In this type of culture, it is like the tail wagging the dog. Individual rights supercede the rights of the group and the group must change to adhere to the rights of the few. While there are legitimate situations where individuals need protection from a dysfunctional or oppressive group, individuals who are sub-par to poor performers can avoid accountability by asserting their individual rights through filing a grievance or discrimination charges against an individual, management or the organization. Also, a minority or special interest group can hold the larger group hostage with their sometimes unreasonable, illogical demands. Like magic, an accountability issue now becomes a gender, racial, religious or some other legal issue that can be a very disruptive factor in the group/organization’s ability to fulfill its mission. (All evidence is self-serving . . .).

Seeking the Balance

With both of the above examples depicting group cultures that are out of balance, the logical solution in fixing their extremism is in Figure 3. This model emphasizes a group/organizational
Rod Hess - Normative Leadership - Helpathy.com

culture where the needs of the group and the individual are in a state of balance with one another. Here, you can retain your individuality and still be a member of a group or team. In this culture, there is strong teamwork and accountability. Peer pressure is applied by the group to bring individuals to higher levels of self awareness, performance and growth. The norm is to be supportive, yet challenging of ourselves and one another in order to maximize the group and individual potential.

Additionally, there is a strong sense of integrity and ownership over individual behavior. Everyone understands the normative expectations of the organizational culture and strives to model and reinforce them. There is very little deviation from what is supposed to happen and what really happens within the group. Each group member strives for excellence and perfection in the execution of responsibilities. This, in turn, gives rise to a highly productive, team-oriented, accountable culture. In theory, this is this sounds great. However, reality proves this to be a difficult process to achieve in a group.

**OUR CHALLENGE**

Within human nature, there is much diversity and similarities in the beliefs that guide the broad spectrum of acceptable and unacceptable patterns of behaviors that individuals and groups use in their pursuit of their self-fulfilling needs. Our individual diversity gives us our uniqueness, but also lays the seeds for conflict with others who are different from us. Our race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, education, political affiliation, occupation, etc., all provide a filter through which we make our decisions. Along with these variables, there are also the motivating factors of power, situational politics, pocketbook and principles that further influence individual behavior and the cultures we create. The combination of extremism, out of balance cultures, illogical, irrational and/or deliberately unacceptable/destructive behaviors that individuals perpetuate in our world is what makes life more difficult than it needs to be.

Having begun our ascent into the 21st century, we as human beings, a society, a world, are at a crossroads. Our world is in a critical norms crisis and today, we are paying the price for the out of balance cultures we have created over the years in our groups and organizations. Poor academic performance and violence plague our schools. In an effort to make a profit in a highly competitive market place, businesses have down-sized, cut corners on the quality of their goods and/or services to customers, and some have utilized unethical business practices creating a culture of politics, corruption and “me-ism.” In the face of continual funding cuts and rising prices, our human service organizations struggle to meet the increasing demand for quality service delivery to their clients. In sports, coaches spend more time dealing with the increase in
negative on- and off-the-field behaviors that reflect the social baggage that athletes bring with them to their teams. In government, a culture of waste, corruption, cronyism, fiscal irresponsibility, political correctness and a lack of accountability unfortunately prevails. In his perceptive brilliance, Walt Kelly identified both the cause and solution to the above problems when he said, “We have met the enemy. He is us.”

As we continue down the path of self-destruction, we can no longer afford to turn a blind eye to the dysfunctional cultures we have created. The normative parameters for acceptable behavior have expanded tremendously over the past 50+ years. Dysfunctional behavior is, in many ways, rewarded instead of being frowned upon.

We need to learn how to transcend these issues and evolve into the next level of our humanity in order to create a sense of balance within ourselves and in our relationships with others. So, instead of judging situations and people from our own biases and beliefs, we should apply a more universal standard that everyone, regardless of race, color, religion, etc., can use in assessing situations and behavior. We can do this by viewing events from a normative perspective.

We created the normative cultures and only we can change them. In Part 2, I will introduce you to the simple, but powerful Normative Leadership system that will enable you to see what is really happening in groups and organizations. More importantly, I will provide you with powerful skills that you can use as a Normative Leader in fixing the normative cultures within your world.

Bibliography
