

Outdated Behaviour: Making Critical Changes

People often transfer behaviour patterns from one situation to another. After all, we are who we are, and we need to be authentic. However, in the workplace, it's important to act in ways that are appropriate to the situation. When we transfer an inappropriate behaviour into the workplace, major challenges can result.

When we're stressed, we're more likely to resort to old, ineffective coping strategies. Our minds work less effectively, we become more reactive, and then we may revert to behaviour we used in previous situations in an attempt to reduce the stress.

When Ed first began work, he transferred a personal coping strategy from childhood into his professional life, and this produced strong feelings of distrust and dislike from co-workers. As a younger brother, he had little power in the family system. He was frequently being told what to do, how to do it, and when to do it. Not just by his parents, but also by his older brother, who was a bully. Ed frankly felt less than an equal in almost any situation, so he learned to observe his older brother's behaviour. When his bossy brother broke a rule, Ed reported these indiscretions to his parents.

Engaging in this behaviour gave him a sense of power. His parents would listen intently to what he was saying and would believe him. For that brief second, he would feel superior—for him, it was a truly amazing feeling.

When Ed got his first job, he sometimes felt that his co-workers were slacking off and perhaps taking credit for other people's accomplishments. He would then go to the boss to discuss his concerns. To his mind, he was merely trying to improve the work situation and felt he had the insight to do so. As you can well imagine, this did not make him a popular co-worker.

Once Ed realized this was an ineffective coping strategy for an adult, and once he understood the true impact of the behaviour, he decided to stop it and change. During moments of stress, when he would contemplate tattling, he would create a different internal dialogue for himself so that he would abstain from old habits.

Ed's supervisor was also upset with his behaviour. Although it was probably helpful in one way (since she got to know what was really happening in the team), it was simply inappropriate to be acting this way at work. Ed was told to be direct with his co-workers when concerns arose for him, although dealing directly was not one of his strengths.

What can you do if one of your team members is gossiping about other employees? Just as the supervisor did in the example above, it's best to ask that staff member to speak directly to the other employee or employees and to resolve the concerns directly.

To help your gossiping team member process this old behaviour and make changes, ask them questions like the following:

- What prevents you from speaking directly to your co-worker about your concern?
- What do you believe about the current situation?
- Have you ever acted this way in the past?

- Is this an old *pattern* of behaviour (that is, you've done this more than a few times)?
- In the past, how has this pattern of behaviour affected your life?
- How is this pattern working for you or not working for you?
- How might you deal differently with this situation?
- What can you learn from this situation to help you in your future career?
- What might be the payoffs of taking the risk to engage in the new behaviour?
- Are you willing to deal differently with situations like this?

Essentially, you will be asking your employee what their motive is and what outcome they desire. Then you can ask them how they might approach the situation in a new way that will help them achieve their desired outcome. Spend time helping your team member identify a more effective strategy. To make sure your employee doesn't become discouraged or alienated, don't forget to acknowledge that most of us become stuck in old behaviours at various points in our lives. At the same time, help your employee realize that you will no longer support tattling, gossiping, or other inappropriate behaviour.

As a supervisor or manager, ensure that you are a solid role model by never speaking negatively about your boss, colleagues, or workers. Help any gossiping employee to see what is causing their frustrations. Perhaps the person is simply feeling overstressed or is struggling with an issue outside of work that is affecting the way they view their co-worker.

By following this approach, you'll also nurture an environment where all team members will show respect and give each other support as they deal directly with any differences. These straightforward interactions will also save valuable time and energy. In a cooperative workplace like this, your employees will be more relaxed and energetic, and they'll be motivated to become the best team members they can be.

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This is an excerpt of Sylvia's recently released book, *Unleashing Team Potential: Lessons for Managers from our Canine Friends*.