How to manage difficult people (part 1): am I the problem?

Leading people in health and social care is a challenge at the best of times, let alone during an unprecedented global pandemic. While many staff are hard working and willing to get on with their roles, there are a significant minority who are difficult to manage at best and downright disruptive at worst. The best leaders know how to recognise these characters and use their understanding of the causes of behaviours to their advantage and challenge and manage behaviours when they cannot be redirected.

In this article, the first in a miniseries on managing difficult people and conflict in the workplace, we will consider how the manager might decide if they, them self, are the problem; that is, if they are the difficult to manage person. It seems reasonable before setting out to manage others, that managers must be sure in themselves they are not the causes of the problems within their team.

As is the case with any paper on managing difficult people, this is not a blueprint, but is rather a guide to some of the issues and questions a manager might consider before setting out to mange difficult people, including them self. Managers who are unwilling, or unable, to reflect on their own abilities and behaviours will ultimately not be able to manage the behaviours of others and their teams will fail.

Ensuring a solid base
We have all encountered leaders whose first and only response to staff is that they are all a problem; they are 'lazy', 'stupid', and just 'do not want to do what they are paid to do in the way in which I want it done'. If you are one such leader, you need to stop and ask yourself perhaps the most challenging personal question 'is it me that is the problem here?'

Witges and Scanlan (2014), point out that what nurse leaders do has a direct impact on staff performance and therefore on patient care and outcomes, it is therefore incumbent on them to be aware of their own shortcomings before they look at the shortcoming of others. In a previous paper in this series, we identified how the ability to be self-aware is part of what it means to have emotional intelligence (Ellis, 2017) and how emotional intelligence is fundamental to self-management and that of others. We will take this idea further forward here and identify some way in which emotional intelligence might be put into practice.

There are some signs that as a leader you may be the one with the problem that needs to be sorted before you turn your attention to the team, failure to do so will mean that you will not succeed. Feeling as if you are an impostor and do not have the capability to do the job and that one day you will be 'found out' is not the same as truly being the problem within the team, this is worth saying here as the prevalence of 'impostor syndrome' among nurses and healthcare leaders is staggeringly high (Barrow, 2019) and will be the subject of a later paper in the wider leadership series. As we will see, the only way you can differentiate between the two, being the problem

PETER ELLIS
Independent Nursing and Health Care Consultant, Writer and Educator

and impostor syndrome is to listen to others.

Where then can you look to identify if you are the problem? Toxic behaviours among managers are those which undermine others, are bullying and persistently negative and destructive (Webster et al, 2014). If you are the problem, you may already know for yourself as the honest part of your brain tells you. Having the ability to be self-aware like this is evidence of emotional intelligence and demonstrates you can rectify this situation for yourself. Displacing the problem to others, on the other hand, is a common feature of problem management.

Sometimes the message about our shortcomings as a manager need to come from others. Listening to the feedback from others is an important tool for the manager in identifying if they are the problem (Richey and Waite, 2018). This might mean listening to what members of the team say to you and how they say it. Conversely it may mean considering why members of the team are not approaching you and talking to you like they used to. Either way where this is the norm, rather than a single disgruntled individual complaining to you, you need to listen.

If you feel like the whole team is against you, then it is highly likely you are the one with the problem. Some managers will say they are not at work to be liked, while this is true, managers should not take this to mean 'my role is not to be liked'. There is a dangerous edge of narcissism here that is both damaging to the individual and to the team. Clarke and Mahadi (2015) point out from their research how mutual respect has a positive influence on the performance of a team as well as on self-esteem for everyone. If the role of the manager is to get a job of work done and performance is a measure of getting the job done, why would you choose not to work in an environment of mutual respect?

Of course, feedback can also come through supervision and appraisal from your line manager. If your line manager is telling you what you are telling yourself, or what you are hearing from your team, then you are getting triangulated feedback which tells you that you need to take some remedial action. Again, a note of caution here, line managers also get it wrong, so if you are

hearing bad things form your line manager and no-one else, then you may need to consider if, in fact, it is they who are the problem.

Remedial action is not just about considering and correcting your approach to work and relationships in the workplace, it is also about ensuring this is seen and understood by others. In their justly famous JOHARI window, Luft and Ingham (1955) identify how there are four windows into our personality and behaviours which have the potential to inform us about ourselves.

The first window refers to our public self and is called the open or free area. In this window is the self we know about and which is on view to everyone else. There is nothing hidden from anyone in this pane.

The second window refers to the blind spot we all have about who we are, how we behave and how we are perceived by others. This is the area of ourselves where we need to listen to the feedback of others. In listening to what others say about us, we start to gain an insight into how we come across and the size of the blind spot we have will start to decrease.

The third pane in the window is the pane in which we keep the elements of our self which are known only to us; the hidden pane. We keep elements of who we are hidden here so that other people will not see them. We may believe this stops us becoming vulnerable or looking weak, when in fact the larger this area the less authentic we appear to others and the more difficult it is to gain trust.

Then finally the fourth pane is what Luft and Ingham (1955) term the 'unknown area' and relates to elements of who we are of which we are not aware and of which others likewise have no knowledge. It is this area which might come to the fore in a crisis and dictates how we behave under stress and strain. It is perhaps an area many more managers are seeing for themselves during the COVID-19 pandemic and reflecting on our strengths and weakness now will allow us to grow those elements of ourselves of which we are aware and which we share with others.

Thinking about the Johari window and the desire managers might have to better manage others, it is increasingly apparent, that any

manager setting out to manage others must first have mastery of them self. Self-mastery allows us to be increasingly sure we are not the problem as well as allowing us to manage the perceptions others have of us. As we have seen, self-mastery will arise out of consideration of the feedback others provide and, this allows the manager to grow the elements of them self over which they have control.

CONCLUSION

Here we have established managing people can be a challenge. We have seen one of the biggest challenges facing the health and social care leader is working out if, in fact, they are part of the problem in the place in which they work. Being self-aware and by listening to others, managers can identify if it is they who need to change before they start to address the issues they have in their team — if any.

Managers to fail to address their own shortcomings will ultimately fail to address any issues they have with difficult behaviours in their team; therefore, managers need to develop self-awareness and emotional intelligence before considering the management of others. **Wuk**

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