



Key Takeaways

- The tendency to conform is stronger than most people realize. Many would allow harm to come to the group rather than stand apart from the group.
- Standing apart can have mixed motives and results. Independents as well as conformists can benefit from taking a critical look at patterns of behavior.
- Because independence is a scarce trait, managers should handle mavericks with care and help them channel independence in useful ways.
- By creating a climate of open discussion and respect, organizations facilitate employee willingness to give honest judgments.
- Studies find that whistleblowers who act within the organization rather than externally have two traits: belief in the integrity of top leadership and concern for their peers. They are engaged with the organization.

Competency Background

In a classic experiment, psychologist Solomon Asch asked people to look at a drawing with three lines and say which one was the same length as a fourth line. About 60 percent of participants gave an obviously wrong answer because they overheard six people before them give the same wrong answer. The six others were researchers pretending to take the questionnaire, and the experiment's results show how difficult it can be to set oneself apart when others are unanimous. In brain scans, the stress of expressing a contrary judgment causes emotion centers to light up (cited in Prentice, 2007).

The coercive power of groupthink is a problem for organizations that rely on team members for sound professional judgment. There are ethical implications as well, since people who believe "everyone does it" will tend to accept rather than report misconduct, including fraud. The good news is that wrong answers in the Asch experiment dropped 75 percent if even one of the overheard answers was different. In other words, one person standing apart can be enough to break the spell of groupthink.

The ability to stand alone is a valuable resource and should be cultivated. Moreover, individuals can cultivate this trait in themselves, even if they are not rebellious by nature, through self-awareness and a little practice. A supportive organization can help individuals speak up at decisive moments.





Individual Contributors

Standing apart from the crowd comes more naturally to some than others. In personality assessments, independent people have lower scores for “agreeableness,” meaning they are less concerned about the feelings and expectations of others. Whistleblowers, who represent an extreme form of stepping apart from the group, tend to combine low scores for agreeableness and high scores for extroversion, meaning they thrive on interaction with others (Bjørkelo, et al., 2010). Since they do not keep to themselves, independents are often known as the squeaky wheels, people who never let anything go by without raising some kind of objection.

On reflection, independents become aware they stand in opposition to the group more often than others, and not always with good cause. To sharpen competency in standing alone (and reduce overall stress in their lives), independents should ask these questions:

- Did this argument arise from a real concern or from a habit of challenge?
- Did it escalate because of an unwillingness to back down?
- Is the issue important enough to keep fighting for?
- What are the specific consequences for the organization if the other side wins?
- Have people stopped listening because the objection comes from me?

Using insights from self-questioning, independents can harness their natural contrariness toward ends they actually care about.

On the other side, individuals who need to strengthen their resistance to groupthink can begin with an unsparing look at specific occasions when they had

a question but did not raise it. Agreeableness, which makes for good listeners and good team players, also has darker aspects (Prentice, 2007):

Submissiveness: No one likes to think of themselves as cringing in the presence of authority, but dominance is universal behavior in social animals. In some cases, the desire to please the boss often runs ahead of his or her actual demands.

Helplessness: Believing that we are powerless or have no choice provides easy justification for a failure to act. As humans, we believe others do wrong because they are bad people, but when we do wrong it is because we are caught in a bad situation.

Diluted responsibility: Group decisions differ from personal decisions in that we feel less accountable for the consequences. A notable exception is a jury trial, where there is high awareness that one vote is enough to prevent an injustice.

Managers

Mavericks and prima donnas can be difficult to work with, and they may consume a disproportionate share of a manager’s time. Often they are top performers or their work involves a specialized skill or talent, as with creatives. By setting themselves apart, seeming to operate by their own rules, mavericks can have a disruptive effect on other team members. Managing mavericks takes intelligent attention.

Despite an outwardly superior manner, mavericks are often vulnerable inside (Leigh, 2009). Managers should engage rather than avoid their mavericks, offering support and appreciation but also spelling out boundaries and specific guidance on how to achieve organizational success in their work. To assure the greatest value to the organization, managers can help mavericks recognize where and how they have a positive influence on performance of the group:



- Give prompt, detailed feedback.
- Encourage mavericks to take responsibility.
- Help them improve in emotional intelligence and self-awareness.
- Show they are vital but not indispensable.
- Show the bigger picture, why their contribution matters.

In the 21st century work environment, employees belonging to Generation Y (or the Millennials) often seem to their elders like prima donnas or mavericks, valuing their independence highly. A coaching style of management, which combines appreciation with specific guidance and team orientation, may be the best fit.

Executives

Organizations in the United States lose approximately 5 percent of revenue to fraud every year, according to an estimate by fraud examiners. At the same time, evidence suggests that only about half of employees report misconduct when they see it (Vadera et al., 2009). Costs of acquiescence in the workplace can be measured in dollars.

Whistleblowers – employees who report misconduct – tend to be independents and hold beliefs that are beneficial to organizations. For example, whistleblowers most often take action because they believe it is their responsibility as an employee. Those who raise the alarm internally, rather than going outside the organization, usually believe they will have the support of top management, and they believe the organization is committed to ethical standards (Vadera et al., 2009). Internal whistleblowers score high on tests for employee engagement (Edmond, 2010a).

To encourage whistleblowing internally, and to discourage the common tendency to accept rule-bending as routine, organizations can take steps that promote employee engagement. A *code of*

conduct, with clear guidelines that apply to employees at all levels, provides a framework for a culture of ethical standards. *Periodic questionnaires* and *focus groups* reveal whether employees believe the organization is sincere in its commitment to standards. *Ethics training* helps leaders and team members become more aware of their attitudes and the impressions they convey to others. This awareness is useful because people overestimate their own objectivity. A survey of physicians found that 61 percent thought they were not influenced by giveaways from drug companies, but only 16 percent thought their peers were uninfluenced (Prentice, 2007).

Techniques for Development

A person's willingness to stand alone depends in large part on personality factors. However, anyone can strengthen this ability through self-awareness and practice. Just as phobics learn to manage their fears a little at a time, "people-pleasers" can learn to stand alone by taking small steps. Improvement begins with understanding the psychology of deciding to speak up (Sekerka & Bagozzi, 2007).

The desire to speak up is preceded by automatic processes, beyond our control, and is followed by self-regulatory processes, which allow us to use our feelings to drive successful behavior. The path to a decision can be mapped as follows:

1. Emotional reaction
2. Cognitive processing (making sense of the facts)
3. Desire to act
4. Self-regulation processing
5. Yes/no decision to act

The emotional reaction in Step 1 is determined by a mix of feelings based on past experiences, expected rewards, and other types of conditioning. It includes feelings about:



<i>Self-efficacy</i>	Belief in your ability to make a difference
<i>Interaction</i>	Need for approval, tendency to please others
<i>Group membership</i>	Identification, desire to preserve harmony in the group
<i>Means of action</i>	Fear of speaking before an audience

After the first emotional reaction, a desire to act emerges and another set of feelings comes into play (Step 4). These feelings have the potential to stop, encourage, or redirect action. For example, if you are in a rush and unintentionally snub someone, you might feel a desire to go back and apologize. A twinge of empathy might provide the spur to action. Empathy, embarrassment, pride, guilt, and similar feelings relating to self and others are learned from parents and peers while growing up. An important feature of these feelings is that we have some ability to use them to motivate behavior.

By keeping a diary of past decisions, with specific instances of choosing not to stand apart from the group, individuals can begin to see patterns in their feelings and behavior. Knowing where the vulnerabilities are – for example, hurrying to assume that speaking up will make no difference – makes it possible to rally support from the self-regulating emotions. If the group is about to make a decision based on incomplete information, imagine explaining your silence to someone who looks up to you. Shame can drive virtuous behavior, and so can the pride of having stood up in a just cause.

Psychologists have observed that the ability to perform a new or difficult behavior increases with repetition. The first step to gaining the ability to stand alone might be raising a question in a meeting (rather than a full-blown objection): “I feel some uncertainty about this. Can someone help me understand the basis for doing X?” As in

the Asch experiment, a single divergent voice may be enough to bring other opinions into the discussion. Whatever the outcome, a precedent is set. The individual is closer to being able to stand alone when the situation calls for it.

Case Study

In 2003, Best Buy launched an innovative reverse-auction system with vendors. The goal was to obtain computer repair parts at the most competitive price. Instead, the system was defrauded for millions due to a corrupt manager, a few dishonest vendors, and a culture of not rocking the boat.

The auction manager received \$100,000 in weekly payments between 2004 and 2007 from one vendor. He also received a Corvette, a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, and a Yamaha ATV, among other gifts. In return, the manager coached certain vendors on how to win auctions with low bids and then bill at a much higher price. Inadequate accounting controls were partly to blame. Also surprising was the unquestioning attitude of other corporate managers.

The organizational culture at that time was “extremely territorial and not welcoming of disagreement,” according to the operations manager who first noticed the discrepancies and then gave evidence of them to the legal department (Edmond, 2010b). The auction manager’s boss and the system technical manager enjoyed and never challenged vendor generosity, which included trips to an island resort, golf outings, shark fishing, expensive dinners, and visits to a strip club (Crosby, 2010a).

Best Buy committed to a strong ethical culture when the scale of abuse became apparent. The operations manager who first spoke up was celebrated within the company. Commenting on the change in organizational culture, he said: “My department is different today. It’s very transparent and we are completely open to discussing issues now” (Edmond, 2010b).



Related Resources

Crisis of Character

Building Corporate Reputation in the Age of Skepticism

By Peter Firestein

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=qbh&AN=52928147&site=ehost-live>

The Art of Followership

How Great Followers Create Great Leaders and Organizations

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By Bradley K. Googins, Philip H. Mirvis, and Steven A. Rochlin

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