

Scapegoating in the Workplace

by **Lou Raye Nichol**

About a year ago, an article appeared in our local paper called "When You Work with a Jerk". The article gave two or three sentence descriptions of all the most horrible people you could imagine in any workplace with epithets such as The Bully, The Historian, The Know-it All, The Rising Star, and The Victim. The Hermit's main sin was that he stayed in his cubicle all day and was hard to draw in. The Naysayer produced a cloud for every silver lining. The Yea-sayer agreed with anything just to get approval. *

Do you have someone in your workplace that virtually no one likes? So what can be going on? The person may indeed be a jerk. Suppose she is, but if we begin to label her we have introduced another element - something arising from us. Something in her is hitting an uncomfortable chord in us.

Perhaps other processes are at play. The Hermit may be absolutely in his element in some workplaces. The Historian's knowledge of all the things that have been tried and did not work may carry valuable information. Is it just possible that the "jerk" label is telling us something about organizational context? Those other processes may be splitting and scapegoating.

Splitting is a psychological defense mechanism originating in earliest childhood. Our immature self could not and cannot tolerate ambiguity. The ambiguity contains conflicts that we cannot hold together, so we comfort ourselves by putting aspects of the conflict into compartments and naming them good and bad. A child (and sometimes an adult), does not have the capacity to understand his mother as an ordinary, flawed human being. She is either wonderful or horrible or alternates between the two. In adulthood we may have similar difficulty with people or situations where we have strong feelings. For example, have you ever known a boss with a pattern of idealizing new employees - seeing them almost as a savior - only to be bitterly disappointed a few months later?

Scapegoating is a form of splitting in groups. It always centers on a problem that is both important and worrying to the group's members. The "problem" represents something so unacceptable that they cannot reconcile it to their self-concepts. However, it will not go away, and the group resolves it by locating it in one person. Members fail to notice the problem in themselves, see it in the elected scapegoat and then attempt to solve it by (1) getting the scapegoat to change or (2) getting rid of him. Scapegoating can be malevolent or on the surface, benevolent. Either way individuals caught in the process become locked into unpleasant or demeaning roles.

Benevolent scapegoating creates a "Patient". Here, the group identifies someone it thinks needs help and offers advice and wisdom to make him better. Malevolent forms create a "Pariah". The group finds someone whose behavior is disturbing and ostracizes her - thus the "jerks". A distinguishing feature of both is that they fail to address root causes. For instance, benevolent scapegoating is different from

genuinely helping someone in need; it indicates instead that the group needs to create someone who needs help.

Take for example a mental health team I once worked with. When I was introduced to this team, an entry-level worker had been a member for six months. He was attractive and bright and had the right basic skills, but he was discouraged to the point of considering a change in his profession. It emerged that much of the staff debriefing sessions after groups were spent in helping him to see and correct mistakes he made. As is always true in scapegoating, there was a kernel of truth; he was inexperienced. However, anyone who has worked in mental health knows that success is elusive and difficult to attribute. Everyone on the team was concerned about their effectiveness; everyone made mistakes. So long as others did not open their own to scrutiny, he carried that burden for them all. What appeared to be attempts to support him, actually served to make the others feel wise and skillful.

The question remains - why not scapegoat people? Why spend our time dealing with difficult people rather than getting on with the job? Are we scapegoating? Some current thinking is that we choose people who buy in and fit into the organization or they go. Scapegoating is a poor option because it is a defense. Through it we avoid facing uncomfortable issues in our reality. It is destructive to the person, and it weakens the group. We do not deal with the very real concern the scapegoat represents for us, and instead our energy goes into maintaining a status quo of less than optimum performance.

* The News and Observer, Raleigh, June 20, 1999.

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