



"...the whole bunch!"

Several years ago I had the opportunity to do some training in a department of a well-known, successful organization. Because they didn't want to shut down the department for the proposed two days of training, we decided to do two hours twice a week for three weeks. This worked out well as it allowed the participants to get the training in small bites and apply in a practical manner some of the principles that we could discuss at the next session.

As in all group endeavors, it is almost impossible to pick a time when everyone will be there all the time. Vacations, customer emergencies, or a sick child always seem to pop up and take their toll. This was no exception. The day before the first session, Margaret had to go on leave for a family medical emergency involving her mother. No one knew if or when Margaret would return to receive any of the training. Via e-mail, I wished her well with her mom's situation and told her that she could pick up with us when she returned, and that we would catch her up the best we could.

The first session was tremendous, and I wish I could take some of the credit. It was a fantastic group to work with—folks who liked to have “serious fun.” Every person participated and came prepared each time with what little “homework” had been assigned. It was obvious they all got along and were very supportive of each other.

About midway through that first session, I was thinking that maybe this was just the first session “honeymoon,” and that in subsequent sessions, the novelty would wear off and the group would return to “normal,” although in group dynamics there really isn't such a thing.

The second, third, and fourth sessions were much the same, and I quickly became very fond of the participants and looked forward each week to our getting together.

The fifth session was different. The group was subdued, participation was muted, and most of the smiles and banter disappeared. The only outward difference was that Margaret had returned. Our sixth session, our last, was the same as the fifth—cordial but not the “rock and roll” atmosphere as before. Maybe it just took a little longer than usual for the honeymoon to end?

I got to know a couple of the managers pretty well. After our last session one of them hung around as I was packing up. We talked about the program and how he could help ensure the longevity of the training. I told him it was unfortunate Margaret had to miss so many of the sessions. He said simply, “Margaret is bad news.” I didn't pursue it and we moved on to other points.

In subsequent years I have observed similar situations—though none as dramatic as this—where group morale, teamwork, and fun changed suddenly. I often questioned whether just one person, like Margaret, who was not a supervisor or manager, could have such a chilling effect on a group. I had never seen research on the subject and was hesitant to make a hard and fast decision that could

condemn a single individual for being the cause of sudden and rampant negativity.

Somehow I got on the mailing list of the University of Washington business school. In the spring 2007 issue of the business school's magazine, there is an article about the work of two researchers at the University of Washington, and how they had discovered that one "bad apple" can, indeed, spoil the whole bunch.

Their research shows that, sometimes, a single "toxic" individual is all it takes to lead to organizational dysfunction, and that team members turn to anxiety, fear, and anger to cope. When this happens, trust breaks down and team members disengage.

Another interesting aspect of that research is that one "bad apple" can have far more influence than one or two "good apples."

The Leadership Challenge

1. Do a better job in recruiting by looking beyond the obvious and easy questions like "where did you go to school and what equipment can you operate?" Check references thoroughly and perhaps get assessments of the potential hire to get a better understanding of his or her personality and ability to be a team player. A \$100 professional assessment may prevent a \$40,000 hiring mistake.
2. If a problem employee works in a team environment, that person may need to be placed in an environment where he or she works alone.
3. The problem employee may have to be terminated.

My experience is that toxic individuals are very difficult, if not impossible, to change by coaching, counseling and typical intervention tactics. We, as leaders, have a responsibility, to a certain point, to help team members who have a problem. Our greater responsibility, however, is to our team and our organization.

Let's cut to the chase. Who is that person that you have, right now, dragging down your team and/or organization? If you have let this situation go on for too long, your credibility as a leader is also suffering. You may have a barrel of "good apples" looking to you for answers. Don't let one "bad apple" spoil the whole bunch. Come up with a game plan and a final target date to fix the problem. Leadership is hard. Do what you know is right.

The Article

[Click here](http://bschool.washington.edu/new/full_stories/bad_apples.html) to go right to the referenced article. I assure it will be a couple minutes well invested...very enlightening. If you have trouble with the link, copy and paste this address into your browser http://bschool.washington.edu/new/full_stories/bad_apples.html

I encourage your response to these thoughts. farlgroup@aol.com

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