

Workplace Wellness



Believing People Want to Do Well: Searching for Hidden Greatness Even in Toxic Behaviours

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As Chief Recognition Officer at Greatness Magnified and having conducted or led a team that has engaged in over 100 health care team consultations, I can tell you that I can count on one hand the number of people who set out to deliberately and systematically tear down other people, their team, and the organization.

Yet, how often are we pointing fingers? There's got to be a "bad apple" to suss out, right?

Nope. This only serves to create further damage, distracting us from the real and root issues; the very opportunities to "fix" things and find sustainable solutions.

I know what you're thinking: "But you've never met Sheila/Kwasi/Alex!"



Here's the truth: very few people make it their mission in life to harm and hurt others. To be very clear, I am not saying that toxic behaviours are never present; they do need to be dealt with decisively. But it's tricky. Read on and let's explore this together. And of course, check out CDHA's Healthy & Respectful Workplace resources at oasisdiscussions.ca/healthy-workplace-matters/ if you haven't already.

The rest of us are doing the best we can, and sometimes our capacity is low. In those times, we may not:

- make the best choices
- ask for help
- look at the resources we have available
- have the energy to find solutions
- feel hopeful and optimistic
- give the benefit of the doubt

Sometimes we can bounce back quickly, while at other times, for a litany of reasons, we stay low for a while. However, being malicious is rarely the intention. It's often a result of frustration, roadblocks, a lack of resiliency, not talking through key issues, and other heavy "stuff of life."

So what can we learn from this?

It's very easy to lose hope in the middle of an interpersonal conflict storm. This isn't about "taking it" if you're being disrespected and treated poorly; feedback is essential to letting someone—including the person who signs the paycheques—know that their behaviour isn't acceptable or aligned with expectations.

Now, before you think, "I can't! I need this job!" Well, that's the benefit of the talent shortage. Dental hygienist rockstars, you have options. Leaving is always on the table. Your dignity and self-respect cannot be bought for a good benefits package.

Before you pack up your things and polish up the resume, though, I have an idea that will give you the motivation to take action: assume they don't know the impact of their actions and words.

WHEN CURIOSITY MEETS EMPATHY

When you shift to a state of curiosity where you wonder why, right now, the person's baseline of "doing the best they can" is lower than their normal best, you are shifting into empathy mode. If you have any chance of recognizing their greatness behind the icky stuff, you need to draw on even a tiny reserve of compassion. Unless you have confirmation that

their behaviour is deliberately problematic, assume there's a solution yet to be co-created.

Jumping to judgement and dishing out “jerk” cards like samples at Costco will create way more problems in the long term. Specifically:

- **Tunnel Vision:** The longer issues go unresolved, and assumptions set in, the more likely you are to see what's not working in them, and be less able to see evidence to the contrary.
- **Toxic Scorecard:** As the data “mount” about their deliberate and increasingly problematic behaviour in your eyes, you get farther and farther away from a lower pressure conversation bridge, “Hey, can we talk?” (It's like that Seinfeld episode where he couldn't remember the name of the person he was dating, but it got past the point where he could ask her, leading to a very comic end to that episode. In real life, unresolved issues are the opposite of funny.)
- **Learned Helplessness:** Seeing that you don't have any control over how someone treats you or behaves can create learned helplessness. If you really don't see any possibility that things will be better, why would you try?

Pulling back like we're doing in this article is key as it's perfectly normal to find ourselves in the grips of **cognitive dissonance**. When we take a strong stand, it creates psychological discomfort to change that opinion and a lot of humility to say maybe I was wrong or could look at it differently.

This experience of moving through the mucky stuff at work can:

- equip you with greater empathy for people when struggling
- help someone get unstuck
- nourish your future self (by resolving this now)
- allow you to examine the context versus assuming a personality flaw
- cool your jets to avoid having to apologize later

Curiosity, empathy, and, I believe, greatness, are always present. It's not just a gift to the person receiving this understanding. It is a gift to you.

