Attitude: The “Wallenda Factor”

October 2010

Training & Organizational Effectiveness
Office of Human Resources
Oregon State University
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Attitude & Management: Context

What does attitude have to do with managing? After all, you don’t manage attitudes; people are responsible for their own disposition. Even during trying times, people ultimately make the choice of how they will act.

If you spent time observing the behavior and actions of others, at most you can make an educated guess about their attitude. As a supervisor, you will assess employee performance and make judgments on employee behavior and actions, but not attitude. Yet, a person’s attitude is what directly influences his or her approach to work.

If you had the option to either work with someone who has a great attitude with average talent, or with someone who has incredible talent but with a suspect attitude, which would you pick? Most people will choose to work with the person who has a terrific attitude.

Attitude makes a difference in the overall effectiveness of you and your employees.

Learning Objectives

- Understand the relationship between your attitude, and your beliefs and behaviors.
- Learn about the “Wallenda Factor” and how self-fulfilling prophecy effects outcomes.
- Reflect on your personal attitude and approach toward work.
- Reflect on the impact of your conversations with employees.
Attitude Adjustment Scale: A Self Assessment Tool

Instructions: To begin thinking about attitude, let’s start by self-assessment. Read the statement and circle the number where you feel you belong. If you circle a 10, you are saying your attitude could not be better in this area; if you circle a 1, you are saying it could not be worse. BE HONEST, this is only for yourself.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LOW</th>
<th>HIGH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Negative)</td>
<td>(Positive)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. If I were to guess, my feeling is that my boss would currently rate my attitude as a: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
2. Given the same chance, my co-workers and family would rate my attitude as a: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
3. Realistically, I would rate my attitude as a: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
4. In dealing with others, I believe my effectiveness would rate at a: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
5. My current creativity level is rated as a: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
6. If there were a meter, my sense of humor rates close to a: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
7. My recent disposition - the patience and sensitivity I show to others - deserves a: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
8. When it comes to not allowing little things to bother me, I deserve a: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
9. Based upon the number of compliments I have received lately, I deserve a: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
10. My enthusiasm towards my job and life during the past few weeks rates as a: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

**TOTAL:**

Taken from “Attitude: Your Most priceless Possession” by Elwood N. Chapman.
Behavior, Attitude, and Belief Relationship

- **Behavior** is reflected in one’s actions.
- **Attitude** represents one’s feelings or emotions toward something.
- **Beliefs** are the convictions and underlying truths one holds.

In this model, beliefs influence attitude which affects behavior. What we notice in the behaviors of others will reinforce or challenge their underlying belief structure and attitude.

**Exercise: Understanding Your Beliefs and Attitude**

As a manager or supervisor, you most likely view your employees based on your core convictions and beliefs. What are the underlying beliefs you hold about employees?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

How do these beliefs affect your attitude towards those you supervise? Towards coworkers and others?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Think through several situations and describe how your beliefs and attitude influenced your actions towards these employees or coworkers?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
As a manager or supervisor, taking time to identify your core beliefs will give you a deeper understanding of how your attitude shapes your actions and interactions with your employees and colleagues. The initial place to influence attitude is to understand our own attitude first.

**Exercise: Understanding the Belief’s and Attitudes of Another**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructions: Assume a person believes as listed below. This has influenced the person’s attitude as stated. Can you anticipate what actions are likely to play out?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Behavior**

*My actions*

- Employee struggling with several tasks.
- Employee gets along well with coworkers.
- Employee consistently shows up on time.

**Attitude**

*My feelings or emotions toward [something]*

- Employee likely to “screw up.”
- Employee needs to be monitored.
- Employee incapable of doing job.

**Belief**

*My convictions, underlying truths*

- Control is essential.
- Employees will take advantage of a system when given the chance.
- Employees need to prove themselves as trustworthy.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructions: Assume a person believes as stated below. You observe the following actions. What attitudes will likely play out as this supervisor works with the employee?</th>
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</table>

**Behavior**

*My actions*

- Employee struggling with several tasks.
- Employee gets along well with coworkers.
- Employee consistently shows up on time.

**Attitude**

*My feelings or emotions toward [something]*

- Employee likely to “screw up.”
- Employee needs to be monitored.
- Employee incapable of doing job.

**Belief**

*My convictions, underlying truths*

- Employees are good.
- Employees desire to do well; excel.
- Employees will do an honest job; are trustworthy.
The “Wallenda Factor”

“The greatest discovery of our generation is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind. As you think, so shall you be.”

—William James, Father of American Psychology

• Self regard relates to one’s belief in their competencies, i.e., “Do I believe I can do the job?”
• The Wallenda Factor relates to one’s perception of the outcome of an event.

A person’s negative perspective in these two dimensions means that he or she believes that:
1. Success is not possible, AND
2. What is being asked of him or her can’t be produced.

On the other hand, a person’s positive perception in these two dimensions means the person:
1. Believes in his or her ability, AND
2. Favorably views the task or project as something he or she can produce.

Self regard is an intrinsic judgment, while the “Wallenda Factor” is an extrinsic judgment about producing an outcome.

Scale of Perspectives Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High (+)</th>
<th>Low (-)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self Regard</td>
<td>Wallenda Factor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(outcome judgment)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Protest</td>
<td>- Self-devaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Grievance</td>
<td>- Despondency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Career Change</td>
<td>- Self-doubt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (-)</td>
<td>High (+)</td>
</tr>
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The following excerpts illustrate how Bennis and Nanus derived this matrix. These passages are taken from Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge, pages 70-73.

“Shortly after [Karl] Wallenda fell to his death in 1978 (traversing a 75-foot high wire in downtown San Juan, Puerto Rico), his wife, also an aerialist, discussed that fateful San Juan walk, ‘All karl thought about for three straight months prior to it was falling. It was the first time he’d ever thought about that, and it seemed to me that he put all his energies into not

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falling rather than walking the tightrope.’ Mrs. Wallenda added that her husband even went so far as to personally supervise the installation of the tightrope, making certain that the guy wires were secure, ‘something he had never even thought of doing before.’

From what we learned from interviews with successful leaders, it became increasingly clear that when Karl Wallenda poured his energies into not falling rather than walking the tightrope, he was virtually destined to fail.

…Or consider Ray Meyer – [one of the most successful coaches] in college basketball, who led DePaul University to 42 consecutive years of winning seasons. When his team dropped its first game after 29 straight home court victories, we called to see how he felt about it. His response was vintage Wallenda: ‘Great! Now I can start concentrating on winning, not on not losing.’ Meyer helped frame for us what we’re now referring to as the Wallenda factor, the capacity to embrace positive goals, to pour one’s energies into the task, not into looking behind and dredging up excuses for past events.”

Another element of the “Wallenda Factor” is on a focus of learning. That is, as organizations strive to accomplish challenging outcomes, there will be setbacks. When the mindset is that of learning and not failing, then the learning helps drive people to produce the set of intended outcomes. Here is an excerpt that illustrates the emphasis of learning.

“It’s like learning to ski. If you’re not falling down, you’re not learning. The tension here, integrated by these leaders, is that of failure versus learning. While we can’t say that [leaders] exactly hailed failure, they certainly seemed to profit from it. They used the energy springing from paradox [of failure] to reach higher goals. Almost every ‘false step’ was regarded as an opportunity and not as the end of the world. They [leaders] were convinced that they could learn – and, more important, that their organizations could learn – how to succeed at whatever they undertook as their vision.”

**Positive Self-Regard When Relating to Others**

In your managerial or supervisory role, what’s your capacity to have and come from positive self-regard for those you supervise? Rate yourself on:

1. The ability to accept people as they are.
2. The capacity to approach relationships and problems in terms of the present rather than the past.
3. The ability to treat those who are close to you with the same courteous attention that you extend to others.
4. The ability to trust others, even if the risk seems great.
5. The ability to do without constant approval and recognition from others.

“Of all the judgements we pass in life, none is more important than the judgement we pass on ourselves. That judgment impacts every moment and every aspect of our existence.”

—Dr. Nathaniel Branden, Psychologist, Author, and Lecturer
Wallenda Factor: Judgement on the Outcome of an Event

While self-regard is the intrinsic factor, this dimension is the extrinsic factor. The Wallenda factor is the perception one makes about the outcome of an event. As a result of the perception formed of the outcome, one’s energy is directed accordingly.

The Wallenda Factor teaches us of the need to keep a focus on outcomes (or end results) and to embrace our employees in a way that helps them deliver on these outcomes (goals, tasks, projects).

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy (or Expectancy Theory)

“Build self-confidence through high expectations. Successful leaders have high expectations, both of themselves and of their constituents.”
—Kouzes & Posner

- The belief and attitude that we have within our self, toward others or about projects is an important determining factor for what the end result will be.
- Portrayed through the story, “My Fair Lady.” Our belief and support in another person; the expectation that an employee can perform at a level that he/she does not see himself/herself capable of achieving. Creates a shift in the individual’s confidence that he/she can perform at the higher level—and then does so.
- “Flea training” – ask the trainer to illustrate this.

Four Truths of Attitude

1. More than anything else, it is our attitude at the beginning of a task that will bring about its successful outcome.

2. Our attitude toward others determines their attitude toward us.

3. Before you can achieve the kind of life you want, you must think, act, talk, and conduct yourself in all of your affairs as would the person you wish to become. Attitude is not the result of success; success is the result of positive attitudes.

4. The deepest craving of human beings is self esteem: to be needed, to feel important and to be appreciated. When you treat every person you meet as the most important person in the world, both of you will benefit.

What Are You Leaving People With: Feeling More or Less Capable?

As a supervisor your beliefs, attitude and behaviors towards your employees matter. The conversations you have with them are critical to their ability to connect with you. If you keep in mind how important you are to them and act accordingly, employees will want to be aligned with you to make a positive difference.
Consider an important interaction with your supervisor or manager and ask yourself, “Did I feel more capable and persist in my efforts?” Or, “Did I feel less capable and find myself not performing as well, or needing to draw upon energy from another source to sustain my effort towards a goal?”

Illustration: Examining Interactions

As a result of the interaction, did I feel more or less capable of getting results?

More capable

Performance and desire increased; energizing.

Less capable

Performance and desire declined; energy draining.

Seems like we need a conclusion or something here…

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