

1 The Blue Suitcase Phenomenon

Many Leaders Create an Effect They Did Not Intend

A few years ago, a group invited me to speak to their annual leadership conference in Europe, and they included my family on the trip. A month or so before our departure, my wife, Anne, told me about a lifelong dream to visit Portugal and wondered if we could stop in Lisbon on the way to the meeting. Our travel agent told her that our airfare would change only slightly, so I said somewhat distractedly, “Fine with me.” Anne made the hotel arrangements, and I moved the departure date up on my calendar.

Just days before we left for our trip, the hotel confirmation arrived. I went into shock when I saw the exorbitant charge for our hotel stay in Portugal and asked Anne with visible irritation, “How can we afford this? There is no way we have enough money to stay in that hotel.” Anne calmly explained that she was upset, too, but it was the only hotel that had space available. She then shared her plan to save money by bringing our food with us. Anne brought down the old blue suitcase from the attic and filled it with food for our four days in Portugal. At that point, it was too late to change our flights without a significant penalty, so we moved ahead with her plan.

After flying all night, Anne, our two sons, and I checked into the beautiful Hotel Estoril del Sol, a magnificent beachfront property in Lisbon and ate our first breakfast from the food Anne packed in the blue suitcase. I opened a miniature box of cereal with my Swiss Army knife and squirted it with room temperature milk from a small carton that needed no refrigeration. My father always described his two grandsons as “appetites with skin stretched over them,” and you could tell from the faces of our two sons that the Blue Suitcase Plan was not getting off to a good start! The view of the Atlantic Ocean was beautiful, but the breakfast was dreadful. Anne noted our grumpy moods and suggested we change clothes and begin our tour of Lisbon.

On the way down, our elevator stopped on the mezzanine level. As the doors parted, we looked straight into the hotel dining room. It looked like a spectacular movie set. With a backdrop of the bluest ocean I’d ever seen, linen-draped tables were laden with magnificent food. Large ice swans and flowers decorated the tables as pleasant servers attentively bustled around. What I noticed most, however, was how happy everyone in the dining room seemed to be. I knew the reason they were happy—they were eating breakfast in that beautiful dining room!

Sensing trouble, Anne pulled my arm and led us down the stairs out into the bright Portuguese sunshine. After several hours of sightseeing, we stopped for lunch in a park with a shady bench overlooking the magnificent bay. Anne handed me a can of tuna fish with a pull top ring and some saltines—our lunch. I felt grateful for her resourcefulness, but these types of meals went on for four days. Our boys bordered on hostility and aggression after being denied their normal caloric intake for that long. They were in that preadolescent growth phase when they ate constantly and only became taller.

The night before our departure, I stopped to check our bill with the front desk clerk. As I turned to leave, she said pleasantly, “Mr. Irwin, may I make your breakfast reservation in the hotel dining

room tomorrow morning before you leave for the airport?” Not understanding the comment, I turned and asked her to explain. “Of course, *all of your meals are included in the room fee.*” In a millisecond, it all became clear! The reason the hotel was so expensive was that our meals were included in the price of the room. We had just spent four days eating the most awful food I could remember, when we could have been eating in the beautiful hotel dining room with all the other happy guests. The bitter irony was that we had to leave for the airport the next morning before the restaurant opened, so we even missed the one meal that we still had coming!

In defense of my incredibly smart wife, Anne had asked about meals when she made the reservation. Something obviously was lost in the translation between the hotel and our travel agent.

Where Does Your Organization Eat?

It is always surprising to me how so many organizations eat out of the blue suitcase of mediocre performance when both the leaders and the workers themselves long to eat in the beautiful dining room of exceptional performance. What’s the difference between those organizations that eat out of the suitcase versus in the dining room? While economic conditions and strategic decisions on how best to capitalize on market opportunities make a huge difference, ultimately, the performance of the people in the organization determine its fate.

We see some organizations with happy, motivated employees solving problems, delighting customers, and working hard to reach goals. We observe others with a dreadful culture of rude employees who transfer us to the wrong department, or when we call their 800 number for customer support, the person on the phone acts as if we were a complete idiot. When I call in for computer support, that depiction may be justified—I just don’t want to be treated that way.

Engagement surveys should dishearten any of us who want our organizations to prosper. Gallup reported that 67% of workers are

disengaged in the workplace. Even more disconcerting is that in the disengaged group, 17.2% are “actively disengaged,”¹ meaning that they seek to work as little as possible.

We’ve watched *Office Space* and laughed at the scene where Bob, the consultant, interviews Peter, one of the workers at Initech.

BOB SLYDELL: Y’see, what we’re trying to do here, we’re just trying to get a feel for how people spend their day. So, if you would, would you just walk us through a typical day for you?

PETER: Yeah.

BOB SLYDELL: Great.

PETER: Well, I generally come in at least 15 minutes late. I use the sidedoor, that way Lumbergh can’t see me. Uh, and after that, I just sorta space out for about an hour.

BOB PORTER: Space out?

PETER: Yeah. I just stare at my desk but it looks like I’m working. I do that for probably another hour after lunch, too. I’d probably, say, in a given week, I probably do about 15 minutes of real, actual work.²

We laugh but also quietly wonder if Peter works for us. While *Office Space* seems farcical on its face, it also touches a nerve. The Gallup and other data suggest there are more Peters in the workplace than we might assume.

Many view their jobs as a penalty box between weekends. They find little to no hope that their work will ever provide more than a paycheck to pay some bills and to enable the pursuit of fulfillment elsewhere.

I frequently speak to groups of senior executives and often ask a question. “How many of you feel that maybe not all, but many of

the employees working in your organization are capable of making a higher contribution to the organization than they currently are?” It’s rare when I do not get close to a 100% “yes” to that question. I then ask a more difficult but related question. “If they can make a higher contribution to your organization, then why aren’t they?” What corporate leader, what parent, what coach doesn’t want to release the extraordinary potential of the employees, players, students, or children under their influence? Isn’t it a critical part of our job to figure this out?

The reality is that this challenge extends far beyond the corporate environment. What parent hasn’t agonized over how to get a seemingly unmotivated child to care about school and their future? What teacher hasn’t begun his or her career with the idealistic aspiration of stoking the flames of intrinsic motivation and transforming their lackluster students into talented academic performers? What coach hasn’t longed to find the key to unlock a gifted but underperforming athlete’s potential? Scout leaders, religious, and other community leaders and anyone who seeks to make a difference in others’ lives wrestles with the question, “How do I get another person to rise above the daily-ness of their lives to perform beyond what anyone thought possible?”

The age-old question for every organization—how do we bring out the best in those we are responsible for leading? How do we get them to care? How do we ensure productivity, quality, timeliness, and great attention to customers? How do we help them love their jobs? These represent the most pivotal questions that should keep any competent, conscientious leader awake at night. What makes this especially vexing rests in the reality that the answer to the above questions seems to vary widely among different employees.

Do we know anyone who says I want to go work today and see how badly I can screw up? Do we know anyone who says I really want to work for a firm which embarrasses me when I tell others where I work? My sense is that employees long to eat in the dining room of excellence as much as their leaders. Most want to be proud of their

work and the reputation of the organizations they serve. Despite the inherently positive predisposition of many workers, think about how many organizations languish with terrible customer service, high turnover, and marginal engagement in the work.

The Conundrum

Like most young families, my wife, Anne, and I looked for age-appropriate chores that could be assigned to our two sons for teaching responsibility and self-discipline. Anne took the lead on asking our sons to take out the kitchen garbage every day. There is very little difference between getting children to take out the garbage and running a Fortune 500 company—well, maybe scale and complexity, but some of the fundamentals are the same. How do you motivate another person to do something with quality, speed, and consistency? For some odd reason, the fact that the boys' allowance (their weekly salary) was predicated on getting the garbage out and doing some other chores didn't seem to make that much difference. Neither did the fact that Anne was the parent. As I tell CEOs quite often, position power is not all it's cracked up to be. Anne often resorted to nagging, occasional yelling or fearsome threats, like no TV for a week, which produced short-term results but certainly nothing sustainable. None of these management techniques accomplished anything that transformed our two young sons into conscientious, happy, quality-insuring garbage taker-outers.

How we motivate another person or group of people to do something and do it well is a conundrum. Anyone who has raised a family, led an army, run a company, or coached a team struggles to find the key to motivate an individual person to excel, to realize his or her potential, and to get an important job done well. It is surprising how often we resort to a default position of a negative consequence for not doing something versus an approach that actually results in a better worker and a better person.

Ultimately, don't we hope to foster intrinsic motivation so that the individuals we lead become better employees, better students, or better athletes, and so on. Anne wanted the garbage taken out for sure, but what she and I really wanted was for our gangly teenagers to mature and to eventually have responsible jobs and healthy, accomplished families of their own. She and I longed for our sons to pursue some high and noble purpose with their lives and to make a difference in the world. Maybe running a Fortune 500 company is easier after all!

Task-Driven Leadership

Let me speak to skeptics. Over the years, I've interviewed thousands of leaders, many of whom were hard-driving and task-focused. While giving intellectual assent to the relational aspect of work, these leaders often disparage the soft skills of management. Even as an organizational psychologist, supposedly an expert on the soft side of management, I admit that some of the stuff I read is way too spineless for me, as well. For those readers who are skeptics, try to remain open as I attempt to make a case for the major thesis of this book—we gain an extraordinary ability to transform others when we affirm them versus when we apply what might euphemistically be called *constructive criticism*. Hopefully, you might adopt recommendations from this book strictly out of pragmatism, if nothing else.

Many of the things we do to motivate others, in fact, accomplish the exact opposite of what we intend.

I have consulted with hundreds of organizations during my career. I've heard many task-driven leaders espouse their philosophy of leadership, often in short pithy phrases. Several weeks ago, I sat with a senior leader, who said with great fanfare and sincerity, "I believe people don't do what you expect, they do what you inspect." She smiled at me looking for affirmation that she had finally unlocked the secret to motivation. I didn't want to deflate her and explain how many times I'd heard

that hackneyed phrase over the years. Certainly, it is true that inexperienced workers need more direction, structure, and feedback, but this involves a lot more than inspection.

Here are some other phrases we hear routinely from the task-driven style of leadership.

“I’m going to hold his feet to the fire.”—Origin: a method of torture to force heretics to recant in the Middle Ages.

“I need to light a fire under her.”—A phrase originally used to motivate chimney sweeps who feared climbing to the top inside a high chimney.

“I’m going to hold you accountable.”—*Accountable* is derived from the Old French word *aconter*, such as counting money. The connotation is the thinly veiled threat that you better do what I said to do. We are reminded of the not-so-jolly aspect of Santa’s personality—“keeping a list and checking it twice.”

“One throat to choke.”—On a given initiative, the idea is that you need one person who is accountable for the results.

“There’s nothing so clarifying as a good public hanging.”—When someone does not perform according to expectations, his firing can be used as an example for what happens to those who don’t achieve targeted results.

“He needs some fire in the belly.”—The source of the expression is not known, but it’s conjectured that this metaphor for motivation comes from stoking a potbellied stove.

“I got in his face.”—A direct and aggressive management style intended to provoke action.

“Next time I’m going to write you up.”—A common practice in some organizations thought to intimidate workers to comply under the inherent threat, “You do this again and you’re fired.”

“I’m going to work you so hard, your [private parts] will sweat.”—I overheard this profane expression used ostensibly to motivate a

mid-level manager in a Fortune 500 company, which prided itself on forward-thinking human resource practices.

Macho Management

We have all heard many of these commonly used phrases and maybe even said them ourselves. I like to think of this approach to motivation of employees as *Macho Management*. “I’m tough-minded and in control. I will get you to do what I want done.” If we take out the often good intentions behind the statements, aren’t they a bit self-righteous? Aren’t they a bit patronizing? Aren’t they assuming the worst about human nature?

Do most leaders brazenly act this way? No, it’s typically a more subtle management style. The inherent belief reflected in these sayings is that *I’m going to get you to do something you are fundamentally resistant to doing*. If we look under the hood of Macho Management, it suggests that workers or students or players or children are lazy, irresponsible, lacking ambition, and less intelligent, and therefore require constant scrutiny to ensure that work gets done. We might say, “That’s a bit harsh.” True, but in our drive to get results out of the people we manage or teach or coach or parent, we may adopt methods that appeal to our fundamental need to control outcomes. A question that should keep us up at night is whether there is a way to transform those we lead so that they are internally motivated to achieve excellence without all that brash fanfare. No one who’s been a leader believes it’s easy to get someone to change. No one who has parented, taught, coached, or led people into battle thinks those jobs are easy, either.

Common practices in management today are strikingly different from what new science teaches us and should not be ignored even by those with a track record of success.

If you are a corporate leader, you likely reached your lofty perch by performing your job well and getting others to perform theirs. Many

task-driven leaders excel at getting things done. Their demanding expectations achieve results; however, it's now clear from a growing body of research that for a leader to be effective, it's vital that we spend time and energy in both task-oriented management as well as a framework that values the *emotional and relational dimensions of the people we lead*. Addressing our employees' emotional side has a neurobiological basis that heavily influences the performance of workers. This neurological evidence, which will be presented in subsequent chapters, will likely surprise you and may provide compelling conviction even for task-oriented leaders that there's something of substance to the emotional side of a worker's motivation. Common practices in management today are strikingly different from what science teaches us and should not be ignored even by those with a track record of success.

Bring Out the Best in Others

So, how do we bring out the best in others? What is the secret to helping another person unlock his or her potential? If we knew how to bring out the best characteristics in those we lead, wouldn't we do it? Most leaders hope to exert significant, maybe even extraordinary influence on those they lead and to bring out the best in them. They likely want their followers to flourish personally and, understandably, to perform their jobs to the benefit of the organization they serve. This yearning for the success of others is no different for parents, teachers, coaches, military leaders, and anyone who leads.

Here's the challenge. Recent brain research argues that *many of the things we do to motivate others, in fact, accomplishes the exact opposite of what we intend*. We inadvertently engage the wrong part of the brain, thus short-circuiting what influence we might want to have, such as advancing that person along a meaningful developmental trajectory.

They worked at it with all their heart.

One of my favorite stories from ancient literature is about a man who was charged with rebuilding a vitally important wall to protect a city using a volunteer labor force, whose only building material was damaged rubble from the former wall. During the process of accomplishing what many critics described as impossible, one observer said of the people building the wall, “They worked at it with all their heart.”³

What if we could get people to work with all their heart? What if we could transform those under our influence in such a way that the fires of intrinsic motivation burned brightly and those people found great purpose in their work? Isn't that what we want as leaders, parents, or teachers? We want to transform the attitudes, the work habits, and the passion of those we influence—to get them to do the assigned task, even take out the garbage, with a sense of commitment and energy.

Recent discoveries of brain science coupled with the wisdom of top CEOs, whom I interviewed for this book, give us the answers we've long sought. Chapter 2 opens with a story about a young man who was deeply impacted by some words aptly spoken.

Notes

1. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/188144/employee-engagement-stagnant-2015.aspx>.
2. <http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Office-Space.html>.
3. Nehemiah 4:6 (New International Version).

