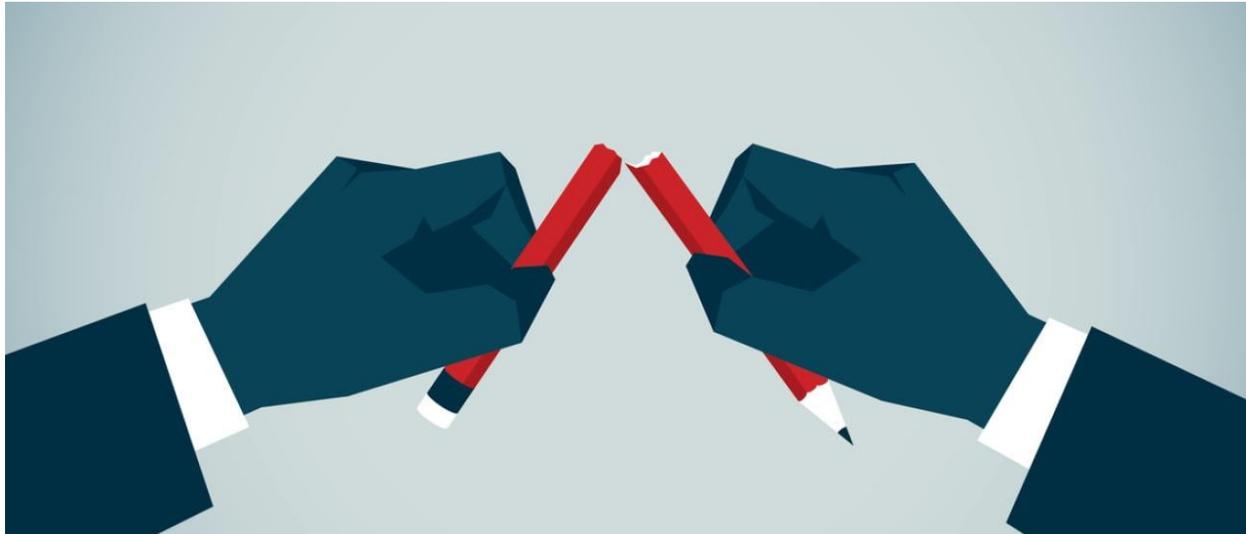

Diffusing Unconscious Misbehaviour in the Workplace



By Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries , INSEAD Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change

When colleagues act out, the reason for their misbehaviour is not always obvious.

Cyril, the vice-president of a large retail operation, had a turbulent relationship with his boss, a strong-headed man with a very autocratic leadership style. Cyril's father had displayed similar characteristics and, as a result, Cyril always found it hard to stand up to bullies. Despite making a superhuman effort not to lose his cool at work, Cyril would often return home fuming after yet another difficult encounter.

To relax, he would pour himself a drink. Pleasant as he normally was, Cyril would become mean-spirited and sometimes aggressive under the influence, even kicking in the door of his house on one occasion. After a drinking spell Cyril would act as if nothing had happened. When confronted with his calamitous behaviour, he would plead ignorance. "I don't remember" was his best defence. It was as though acting out was his way of dealing with problematic issues, instead of truly addressing the things that troubled him.

Acting out describes the process whereby people behave in impulsive, often negative and anti-social ways, to cope with anxieties associated with unconscious emotional conflicts. Unlike acting up, where people deliberately misbehave for a specific reason, acting out is a defence mechanism whereby repressed or hidden emotions are brought out into the open in a destructive manner, such as throwing a tantrum or succumbing to an addiction. Such behaviour is the manifestation of unconscious memories, which reappear as more or less unrecognisable offshoots of unconscious associations.

When people who act out are confronted with their destructive behaviour, they can be quite reluctant to accept responsibility. While this may reduce their discomfort in the short term, their inability to process unresolved issues prevents any constructive change and can destroy their lives.

Underlying issues

Generally speaking, acting out is associated with the behaviour of children. To express distress when they do not get their way, young people may resort to temper tantrums or self-injury, translating into physical pain what they are unable to feel emotionally. It can be a highly effective method of alerting parents to needs that require attention. This is particularly true in adolescence when acting-out behaviour such as smoking, drinking, drug use and even shoplifting should be seen as a cry for help.

As they grow up, most children learn to substitute these attention-seeking strategies with more socially acceptable and constructive forms of communication. Some people like Cyril, however, continue to act out when faced with certain feelings (such as hopelessness, defiance and helplessness) that derive from emotionally charged sensitivities about people or situations from childhood. At these times they may collapse, due to transference reactions—the redirection of highly charged emotions and feelings from one person to another—and regress back to childhood behaviour patterns.

Whereas people who act up are fully aware of, and able to control, their irresponsible behaviour, people who act out are unaware that there may be more constructive ways of dealing with the matter at hand. So, how do we work with people who resort to these strategies and can we stop them from demonstrating their emotions in extreme, physical ways?

Mindful control

When dealing with people like Cyril, we should realise that their conflict-ridden, often obnoxious behaviour is driven not by logic, but by unconscious defences. Their actions are a form of self-protection from feelings and thoughts that threaten their sense of stability. Thus, attempts to give feedback or use rationality and argument are likely to be a waste of time and may only strengthen their defensiveness. Instead, it is best to come from a position of empathy. Roll with the resistances and let those acting out use their own momentum to facilitate reflection and change.

They need to understand the degree to which they are caught up in these transference-like reactions. They should realise that the ability to express conflicts safely and constructively is an important part of mature development and that there are better ways of dealing with conflicts, such as talking about what is troublesome, enlisting a coach or resorting to various forms of psychotherapy. These people need to become more mindfully aware of their underlying issues and how their acting out affects their quality of life.

It is important to listen carefully, to decode what they are saying and reflect the information back to them. This is a great way of building rapport. It is also helpful to explore the discrepancy between their present behaviour and what they wish for the future. This kind of mutual exploration is more likely to motivate them to initiate change. Subsequently, we could encourage them to find solutions to their problems—to make them responsible for whatever change is needed so they become the author of their own solutions.

Over time they will come to truly comprehend that acting out has consequences for which *they* are responsible. They will learn that things are not happening to them; they are happening *because* of them.

Manfred Kets de Vries is the Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change at INSEAD and the Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt Chaired Professor of Leadership Development, Emeritus. He is the Founder of INSEAD's ***Global Leadership Centre*** and the Programme Director of ***The Challenge of Leadership***, one of INSEAD's top Executive Development Programmes. His most recent books are: *You Will Meet a Tall, Dark Stranger: Executive Coaching Challenges*; *Telling Fairy Tales in the Boardroom: How to Make Sure Your Organization Lives Happily Ever After*; and *Riding the Leadership Rollercoaster: An Observer's Guide*.

Follow INSEAD Knowledge on ***Twitter*** and ***Facebook***.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/diffusing-unconscious-misbehaviour-workplace>

About the author(s)

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries is the Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change at INSEAD and the Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt Chaired Professor of Leadership Development, Emeritus.