The golden rule, which many of us learned as children — Do unto others as you would have them do unto you — is an old and honorable maxim that has been a powerful force for honesty and compassion, serving the world well as a guide to personal values and moral behavior. We believe, as author Stephen Covey does, that as an ethical imperative and guide, the golden rule’s “… essential meaning is to understand them [other people] deeply as individuals, the way you would want to be understood, and then to treat them in terms of that understanding.” Difficulties arise when managers apply a literal interpretation of the golden rule, abiding by the letter of the law and not its intent. These managers treat people like they themselves would like to be treated, from their own perspectives, discounting the viewpoints of others. Doing so implies that people are alike and that what we want and need is exactly what others desire. However, each of us is unique and the downside to this interpretation is that we can alienate those who have different needs, desires, hopes, and aspirations.

An old fable vividly dramatizes the negative consequences of following the golden rule literally and is an appropriate metaphor for the kinds of problems that can arise when supervisors strictly follow this well-intended axiom:

Once upon a time, there was a great flood, and involved in this flood were two creatures, a monkey and a fish. The monkey, being agile and experienced, was lucky enough to scramble up a tree and escape the raging waters. As he looked down from his safe perch, he saw the poor fish struggling against the swift current. With the very best of intentions, he reached down and lifted the fish from the water. The result was inevitable.

Executive Summary

Frequently, supervisors take the golden rule — Do unto others as you would have others do unto you — as their prime managerial directive. But employees are unique individuals and as such, they respond to different management methods than managers might like. This is because what one person appreciates, another may not. Supervisors must realize that what works to motivate one employee may not necessarily work well with every employee.
Just as the monkey in the story assumed that the fish’s needs were similar to his own and behaved accordingly, so too do many managers assume that employees think, feel, and want to be treated as they do. Such well-intentioned behavior frequently results in similarly unfortunate circumstances. Let us move from an old tale to a current management scenario:

Pat, a top performer in the organization, was recently promoted to division manager. His new supervisor was orienting him to his new assignment and asked him his assumptions about working with people. Pat responded, “I trust my gut and go by the golden rule, treating others the way I’d like to be treated.”

In some cases, the use of the golden rule may work as intended, especially if respectfully applied to human differences. However, difficulties frequently arise when we use ourselves as the measure of how to treat others. The problem is when others’ perspectives and orientations to life and work are assumed rather than assessed.

With a literal interpretation of the golden rule, the criteria for treatment of others is based on one’s own wants, needs, and perceptions, which does not take into account others’ perspectives and preferences. Such an approach implies that supervisors use themselves as models for understanding how to manage people. A corollary to this rule is that managers treat employees the way managers themselves want to be treated. Often, employees do not want to be treated as their managers or supervisors would like to be treated; they respond to different methods. Therefore, the strict application of the golden rule is not an appropriate model for managers.

**What can go wrong**

How can a literal application of such an ingrained, commonsense adage, one of the oldest ethical maxims, not be the best way to manage people? What one employee appreciates, another may despise. This is because most of our preferences in life are learned and are highly individualized, including how we like to be treated by supervisors.

The tendency to assume that others share our opinions, feelings, and behavior is called the false consensus effect by social psychologists and is considered a fundamental bias in our thinking about other people. We commonly assume that others hold similar political opinions, find the same movies amusing, or believe everyone feels baseball is the definitive American sport. Individuals assume that people agree with them to a greater extent than they actually do across a wide variety of issues.

The bias of assuming that others behave, think, or feel as we do is an error in perception that arises because most people want to believe that others agree with them. This way of viewing the world tends to enhance people’s confidence that their own actions are normal and serves as an affirmation of the correctness of their own views. However, overestimating the trustworthiness of our own ideas can be a significant hindrance to rational thinking. We can always believe there is plenty of support “out there” for our opinions, no matter how egocentric they may be. Hence, people may operate under the false assumption that their beliefs are widely held. False consensus bias can serve as justification for imposing one’s beliefs on others.

The negative effects of false consensus may likewise operate in groups and lead to obstacles in their decisions. Cohesive groups of highly qualified, experienced individuals often share the false belief that everyone in the group agrees with the group’s judgments. Such an illusion of unanimity is a key symptom of faulty decision making called groupthink that has been cited in a number of poorly executed but critical decisions. Notable examples include the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1962 mandated by President Kennedy and his advisors, decisions made by President Johnson and his counselors between 1964 and 1967 to escalate the Vietnam War, and the 1986 decision made by NASA and Morton Thiokol to launch the Challenger space shuttle. Groupthink happens in business, too. For example, a group of smart people made the decision to produce the Cadillac Allanté, a beautiful and expensive car that turned out to be a commercial failure because everyone wrongly believed that the other individuals in the group strongly felt the vehicle would be a fabulous success.

**When the golden rule is inadequate**

The following six key areas denote where literally doing unto others as we would have them do unto us may not be an effective strategy and where following the intent of the golden rule and tailoring our approach to others based on their needs and perceptions is generally more appropriate.

1. **Rewards.** The range of potential differences between ourselves and those we manage can be great. Consider rewards that we might provide employees. Managers sometimes assume that what rewards them likewise rewards employees. A manager may reward a worker with higher pay when the worker really wants prestige, recognition, or more
vacation time. Hence, the proffered reward fails to motivate performance. Many plant managers have taken a top performer and spouse to an extravagant dinner when that was the furthest thing from that couple's desire. They may well have preferred beer and pizza or dinner alone!

Managers frequently do not understand what motivates their employees. In one study, supervisors were asked to rank 10 motivational items according to what they believed their employees wanted from their jobs. There were significant differences between their rankings and the ranking of employees. Employees rated interesting work as their most important job reward. However, supervisors claimed that their workers' highest preference was for good wages (supervisors ranked interesting work fifth). Additionally, employees rated “full appreciation of work done” and the “feeling of being in on things” as their second and third priorities, respectively; supervisors ranked them eighth and tenth, respectively. Overall, supervisors had surprisingly inaccurate perceptions of what motivated their employees. It is significant that these perceptions were obtained from a number of surveys over a 50-year period.

With respect to benefits, some organizations have realized they may have erroneous ideas of the needs of their workers and have attempted to remedy this situation by implementing cafeteria-style or flexible benefit systems. The idea is to allow employees to put together their own benefits package by choosing from available options. A young parent might opt for the company's life and dental insurance plans, while an older employee may choose an improved pension plan.

Though self-selected benefit systems are useful, their applicability may be limited in daily work situations. Managers still must choose and administer many rewards on a regular basis. Certainly, individualizing those rewards is a key to effective impact. Two points need highlighting — the difficulty of predicting employees’ reward systems and others’ perceptions of preferential treatment. Knowing employees well enough to determine individual rewards and motivating factors may seem a daunting task, especially if the number of people is large. Make no mistake: It is time consuming and involves a heightened sense of interpersonal awareness on the part of managers, but it is not impossible. It does, however, take special effort and may entail even keeping notes. Also, when a worker is first presented personalized rewards there is the chance that others may feel the employee “of the moment” is receiving special treatment. Yet, if we are open and clear about what we are doing as managers, repeated use of personalized pay-offs in a widening circle of employees can put this concern to rest. After a while, individualized reinforcement can be observed not to be limited to a privileged few. Does it take special effort to learn what people prefer and administer those preferences in a fair manner? Certainly! Some aspects of being a manager take special effort, and short cuts may not be possible.

2. Diversity. Diversity is an issue that brings a strict interpretation of the golden rule into question. Demographic changes have created a more varied society, and this trend will continue. In the U.S. workforce these shifts and the impact of the civil-rights and follow-on movements have generated an increasing number of workers with differing value systems and backgrounds. Companies are initiating numerous programs geared toward enhancing appreciation of diversity. Valuing diversity means being responsive to a wide range of people unlike oneself. Included are numerous distinctions such as race, gender, class, native language, national origin, physical ability, age, sexual orientation, religion, professional experience, personal preferences, and work styles. Valuing diversity involves treating others as they wish to be treated, not how we wish to be treated. The implications of this shift in perspective are profound and more closely follow an empathetic interpretation of the golden rule, one fostering respect for individual differences. This latter understanding requires setting aside one's own perspectives and preferences in order to perceive others for who they are. It means recognizing that other people's standards and values are as valid as our own.

Sound simplistic? In a culture that has long been accustomed to being relatively monolithic, dominated by white, male, European values, the shift is often difficult.

Once managers understand and accept basic sources of uniqueness in their workers and errors in their own thinking, they become better equipped to meet each worker on his or her own turf. Then, they can explore what interactions and methods will maximize each person's contribution to the firm.

3. Perceptions of harassment. The appropriate legal standard for determining behaviors that constitute a sexually hostile working environment remains unclear. The problem is the behaviors that typically comprise a hostile working environment are subject to individual perceptions, definitions, and interpretations; in other words, behaviors such as sexual jokes and touching may hold entirely different meanings for various individuals. There is no doubt that certain behaviors constitute sexual harassment. For instance, quid pro quo behavior (e.g. a supervisor telling a subordinate to either perform a sexual favor or be terminated) is clearly sexual harassment. Nevertheless, where the behaviors are not so blatant and may still constitute a sexually hostile environment, the question of defining how a reasonable person would interpret behavior becomes much more important.

One problem is gender-based differences in the way men and women view various actions. For instance, one researcher has repeatedly found that men are more likely than women to attribute a woman’s friendliness to sexual interest. This misreading of warmth as a sexual come-on can lead to behavior the woman regards as sexual harassment. Additionally, females are much more likely to report unwelcome sexual attention and define social-sexual behaviors as sexual harass-
ment than do males. Similarly, males are less likely to attribute responsibility for sexual harassment to the alleged harasser than are females, and men are more likely to place blame on the female target than are females.

Supervisors must understand that the perceptions of the allegedly harassed individual are meaningful in a courtroom. A comment that a male supervisor may perceive as complimentary could be perceived by a female as insulting, creating the basis for a sexual harassment charge. It is essential to keep in mind the fact that it is the perceptions of the person on the receiving end, not merely the intentions of the sender, that ultimately determine whether an action is unwelcome. Again, it is evident that basing our behaviors on our own understandings may produce unfortunate consequences, and doing to others as we would have them do to us may be an improper managerial model.

4. Ethics. Ethical decision making has emerged as an important managerial concern in both the academic literature and the business press. A sophisticated statistical analysis of research on gender differences in perceptions of ethical decision making found that women are more likely than men to perceive specific hypothetical business practices as unethical. These differences may carry over to men’s and women’s underlying moral structures, value systems, and ethical frameworks.

And other differences exist: Men and women differ in the justifications used to support unethical behavior, and men are more willing to participate in a wide variety of unethical behavior (including padding travel expenses, using inside information to buy stock, engaging in computer-based theft, and shortcutting paperwork procedures). In order to save their jobs, men are more likely than women to conceal negative performance from superiors, maximize short-run performance even at the expense of long-run company welfare, bend labor rules to cut costs, and authorize the release of a profitable — but potentially unsafe — product.

A problem with a strict interpretation of the golden rule is that as seen above, people’s ethical values differ, and they may mistakenly assume that their preferences coincide with others’. Given differences in ethical perceptions, it is understandable how such variance may create problems at work because both genders tend to see ethical situations from their own (often contradictory) perspectives. Additionally, it may sometimes seem hard to apply the golden rule in corporations where the interests of individuals are subordinated to the needs of the firm and where competitive activities demand selfish behavior. Marketing strategies, for example, do not treat competitors with kindness but are based on self-interest.
5. Culture. Just as individuals have distinct personalities, different cultures possess unique characteristics. Managers who have failed to recognize these differences have committed a number of mistakes. For example, Arabs typically dislike deadlines; therefore, they tend to feel threatened when faced with deadlines. But a significant proportion of Americans try to expedite matters by setting deadlines. As a result, American-owned electronic devices may sit untouched in Middle Eastern repair shops because the device owners made the mistake of requesting the work be completed by a specified time.

Cultural norms also affect leadership style regarding what subordinates come to expect from managers and supervisors. For instance, a manipulative or autocratic style is commonly accepted in Arab, Far Eastern, and Latin countries, whereas a more participative style is required in Austria, Sweden, and Denmark. In Sweden, specifically, it is traditional for employees at all levels to be involved in decisions that affect them. In India, where autocratic decision making is the norm, it is a sign of weakness for managers to consult subordinates about decisions. Therefore, an American manager accustomed to participative decision making may undermine his or her efforts in India by treating employees in a way that he or she would like to be treated, and not how local customs dictate.

6. Leadership. A final area of interest relates to the use of contingency leadership. Contingency leadership calls for using management techniques in a selective, situationally appropriate manner. The contingency approach does two things: It encourages managers to view organizational behavior within a situational context, and it encourages leaders to adopt the style that will have the greatest positive effect on performance and achievement of organizational objectives. Bosses must adjust their style to fit their employees and situations.

In contingency leadership, evolving situations determine when and where various management techniques are appropriate. Research supporting the contingency approach is voluminous.

Employee performance and satisfaction are likely to be maximized when leaders compensate for factors lacking in employees or work settings. However, leaders who spend time explaining tasks when they are already clear or when employees have the ability and experience to handle them will find their input likely to be ineffective because employees will see such directive behavior as redundant or insulting.
A final recommendation for managers is to apply an adaptation of the golden rule, what has been called the platinum rule: Do unto others as they’d like done unto them. This means understanding others — and then dealing with them in ways best for them. It means taking the time to know and appreciate the people around us and adjusting our behavior to make them more comfortable. It means using our knowledge and our sensitivity to try to put others at ease and apply the spirit of the golden rule — not the letter.

For further reading

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