Like a feather

Human Systems embraces four dialectics that inform our approach to leadership and organizational development. A *dialectic* is a set of two seemingly opposite concepts that, when combined, create a new, dynamic concept. One of these dialectics is *hard interior/soft exterior*. A little like a feather has a "backbone" of stiff keratin surrounded by soft fluff, an individual with a hard interior and soft exterior has an uncompromising internal core of personal ethical beliefs and boundaries surrounded by a soft, empathetic, and collaborative outward attitude (Foster, 2013).

Individuals who work in organizations that serve high-needs populations can easily become 'hard' on the outside, that is, they lose their compassion, sense of empathy, and patience when working with clients and coworkers and can become cynical about the effectiveness of their work. These employees have become 'soft' and vulnerable on the inside because they do not have their emotional needs met. As a result, they resort to operating from a defensive or offensive posture, engaging in blaming and bullying behaviors towards clients and coworkers in order to protect their diminishing supply of internal emotional strength.

Express your emotions

In fact, the opportunity to express emotions and have them validated both in individual supervision and in groups is linked with a decrease in anger and frustration toward particularly challenging clients (Ingram, 2013). When individuals do not have their basic emotional and relationship needs met, they are forced to concentrate on merely surviving in their environment, and cannot effectively care for their clients because they are too preoccupied with protecting themselves (Harbottle, Jones, and Thompson, 2014).

On the other hand, employees that have their emotional needs met are able to remain soft on the outside and devote time and energy to compassion, caring, and empathy for others. These individuals have a strong core of ethical principles which they apply consistently and consciously across environments and interactions.

How to be hard on the inside and soft on the outside

How do we cultivate a strong interior and a soft exterior? First, we determine what ethical principles we'd like to use to define our core self. Second, we compare our daily behaviors and interactions against our core principles and work on lining up what we do with what we believe. There are many possible principles and an infinite way to express them, but here are some based on Human Systems' leadership principles:

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- *Prioritize self-care.*

- *Assume that everybody is doing the best they can with what they have and what they know.*

- *Use 'emotional competence' (emotional intelligence + leadership): openly and respectfully express emotions, allow others to do the same, and use uncomfortable emotions as cues for opportunities for individual and organizational change.*

- *Use the triple filter test to avoid gossip and backbiting: Before you say it, is it true? Is it useful? Is it kind?*

- *Cultivate self-awareness of and willingness to work on biases and unproductive behavior patterns.*

- *Address and resolve conflict openly, respectfully, and in a timely manner.*

- *Take responsibility for one's role in a conflict or challenge and working to fix mistakes.*

- *Maintain an open mind and curious attitude.*

- *Communicate openly and transparently, except when doing so would unnecessarily hurt others or break confidentiality.*

- *Empower coworkers and clients: providing tools and resources while respecting autonomy and capabilities in others.*

- *Allow everybody to have an equal voice and contribute according to their capabilities.*

- *Quality of services takes precedence of quantity of services.*

- *Include others in decisions that directly affect their work.*

- *Work towards social and organizational justice.*

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Reflection Questions

1. Choose a principle – either from the list above or one you embrace – that you really believe in. Think about your behaviors and interactions at work over the past few days.

a. Which behaviors were aligned with this principle?

b. Which behaviors went against this principle?

c. What could you work on to bring your behavior more in line with this principle?

d. If all of your behaviors and interactions aligned with this principle, what kinds of changes might you see in yourself and in interactions with others?

2. "Self-care" encompasses many different attitudes and behaviors that humans need to feel physically, emotionally, and spiritually comfortable. Some of these include eating well, exercising, maintaining a schedule, expressing both comfortable and uncomfortable emotions, spending time with people who make you feel good, learning, enjoying nature, maintaining good hygiene and appearance, and expressing yourself creatively.

a. How do you take care of yourself?

b. What else could you be doing that would improve your physical, emotional, and/or spiritual health?

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c. Do you allow others to use up the time you allot for self-care?

d. If you prioritized self-care so that you spent enough time every week maintaining your health, what kinds of changes might you see in yourself and in interactions with others?

3. Think about what is most important at work, both in your own role and for the organization. How does the time you spend on tasks line up with what you think is important?

References

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