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When faculty members misbehave

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Times of high anxiety tend to bring out reactivity. There's no question we're living in anxious times, and theological schools are not exempt from the stress or threats of the era. In anxious times leaders can expect to see an increase in the number of cases of employees or faculty members "behaving badly." One common lament among hapless leaders is, "I don't understand how they can act that way!"

When faced with reactivity in the form of bad behavior we often get stuck in our confusion about how adults can act badly. The mistake, of course, is in seeking a rationality behind bad behavior. There is no "reasoning" or rational to reactivity. Therefore, it's of little value to question people's motives for bad behavior. But it is worth asking, "Hmm, I wonder where that came from?"

It can be helpful for a leader to appreciate that while there is no "reason" for bad behavior, there is a cause behind people's reactivity expressed in the form of bad behavior. Bad behavior serves a purpose. Some people engage in bad behavior because they intuitively understand the purpose the bad behavior will serve. Others engage in reactivity as a learned behavior that yields a desirable response from others. This is not unlike the three-year-old who has learned that throwing a tantrum will help him get his way.

Generally, there are four goals for bad behavior: getting attention, gaining power, getting revenge, and covering up feelings of inadequacy. Because reactivity is a function of emotionality, reactive bad behavior has a goal soliciting an emotional response from others. This is why it's important for leaders to be able function from a thinking posture and respond to reactivity, rather than react to reactivity.

Below is a chart that identifies the goal of the bad behavior, the anxiety it addresses, identifies the response it seeks, and suggests the corrective response needed.

	Getting Attention	Gaining Power	Getting Revenge	Covering up Inadequacy
Goal of behavior	Getting attention, being acknowledged	Wants to be in control.	Desires to hurt others.	Wants to hide, avoid demands and responsibilities
Typical functioning	Being a nuisance, showing off, clowning, underfunctioning.	Acting stubborn, arguing, tantrums, lying, passive-aggressive behavior, underfunctioning.	Projects own hurt feelings onto others. Defiant, sullen, sore loser, delinquent behavior.	Feels inferior, gives up, and rarely participates, talks a good game but does not follow through, clowning.
Anxiety addressed	Being ignored is to be insignificant.	Feels secure when they can control others.	Getting even with people is the only hope to be achieved.	Fear that others will discover how inadequate they feel/are.
Emotional response sought	Annoyance, acknowledgement. Solicits overfunctioning on the part of others.	Defeated, threatened, provoked. Power struggles.	Hurt feelings, outrage, retaliation, conflict, feuding.	Abandonment, neglect so that they'll be left alone.
Corrective response	Do not reward neediness. Being punitive or demonstrating annoyance is a reward. Only provide attention or acknowledgement when this person does something positive.	Avoid power struggle. Reversals (give them the power they think they want). Join the resistance. Demonstrate respect as appropriate. Ask for their help.	Do not demonstrate hurt feelings or frustration. Provide consequences, but not punishment. Reversals. Provide encouragement when appropriate.	Encouragement, praise for effort. Don't give up on them. Challenge. Do not cater to their weakness.

One fascinating element of the above is that these behaviors hold true for children and adults, and even, theological school faculty members. In children the behavior is often easier to recognize, but the same dynamic applies for adults, even highly educated adults! The reason for this is that people do not easily change their emotional repertoire over the course of their lives. When we encounter adults acting badly and find ourselves asking, "How can he act that way?" it may be helpful to realize that we're observing a person reacting as an emotionally functional ten-year-old.

We can allow people their right to go insane every once in a while. When overcome by anxiety, any of us will get reactive. Persons whose pattern it is to act out irresponsibly to get attention, gain power, or attain revenge, however, should be called on it. As for persons who consistently

act out of feelings of inadequacy, the rule for the leader is to not cater to, encourage, or accomodate to weakness.

Adapted from, Perspectives on Congregational Leadership: Applying Systems Theory for Effective Leadership, by Israel Galindo.

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