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The Problem with Rationalizing Behavior

When we look at behavior, especially when we are considering blame or credit for the behavior, we tend to rationalize some behaviors away... As leaders this is an important concept to understand because it has its dangers...what if you rationalize away the one thing that can get everyone hurt?

As people it is very common for us to not think critically about something when we are being pressed for time, or we are annoyed at someone, or even when we are so focused on getting results or accomplishing goals, that we rationalize away behavior that we probably shouldn't and that can create some very bad situations for us.

Here's an example: Let's say you are training ten new employees. All the employees can correctly complete all tasks, except for one employee who has a difficult time completing one of the most critical tasks. You've given that employee some "extra" training and even shown them a few "shortcuts" although

the manager doesn't approve of the shortcuts and has threatened to act on anyone who uses them.

Even though the one person is not completely up to par with the others, when asked you say, "This group is capable of completing all necessary tasks as required," and then sign them off, even the one who can't fully complete the most critical task.

What we have done by including the one person who can't do the critical task is make a rationalization (Distinctiveness) that they may not be able to do "everything" but they can do "everything else," so they will eventually catch on, or be able to do it.

The problem comes when the person either never catches on, never learns it or uses the "shortcuts" and gets in trouble by the boss. Or worse, if the one critical task that isn't done correctly, causes someone to get hurt or killed. Then how much do we care about the abilities or competence of that one employee?

Rationalizing is usually done through one of the following three ways: **Consensus**, **Consistency**, and **Distinctiveness**.

How can I tell if I do this? What is the difference between them, and how can it be dangerous? On the next few pages, you'll see an example of each and suggestion on how to avoid rationalizing away behavior.

**Rationalization
may be defined
as
self-deception
by reasoning**

- Karen Horney
Psychotherapist



“We’ve Never Had an Issue Before”

This comment, along with, “We’ve always done it this way” are two of the comments that should make you think about rationalization.

If someone says either one of these comments you might want to ask yourself if there is an unhealthy level of complacency, especially if the task is a critical task that could create a lot of liability, injury or death.

Rationalizing leads to complacency. Complacency breeds mediocrity.

Is that what your organization strives to be, mediocre?



Rationalizing through Consensus

The process of making an attribution based on how other people perform a specific task.

Example: All employees are trained in the initial phase of on-boarding to answer the telephone saying, “*Good Morning, Afternoon or Evening (depending on the time of day), XYZ Company, this is [name] speaking, how may I be of assistance today?*” This may or may not be a critical step in this business, however it is an expectation of the company to answer the telephone in a uniform manner.

When we compare how different people answer the telephone and we find that everyone uses the script and says the exact same thing (except their name of course), this meets the expectation that the company or organization wants from its employees.

But, now let’s consider the one person who likes to be a little different or doesn’t hold much value in the company script. What happens if they answer the telephone differently than what is expected?

That person answers the telephone saying, “*Hi this is [name] with XYZ Company, what can I do for you today?*”

- Is the boss going to make you change the way you answer the telephone?
- Is the boss going to “rationalize it” away, that it’s not quite the same, but gets the same message across?

If the leader or boss says to themselves, “Well, everyone else does it right, this one person may not be a big deal.” Then they have just completed rationalizing through consensus. They made an attribution of the behavior based on how “everyone else performs the same task.”

If the behavior or task (in this example answering the telephone using a script) is rationalized away, then what we do is create a situation that let’s other employees question why they have to do it that way and she/he doesn’t.

Does this cause a problem with/for other employees? Yes. It may create a sense of favoritism. Is there an equity issue here? Yes, because the other employees may feel it isn’t “fair” to make them answer using the script and the one person gets to “do it their way.”

Now let’s look at another way we rationalize behavior. (Next Page)



Rationalizing through Consistency

The process of making an attribution based on how a person performed the same task on other occasions.



Worker “Bob” works in a glass bottle manufacturing plant. “Bob” has made over 500 bottles a day for the last 3 days, and each one was perfect. On the fourth day, “Bob” comes to work, and the first 200 bottles are made perfectly, but the 201st bottle is made wrong. Do we as the boss say, “Oh, well, one wrong out of that many (consistency) isn’t a big deal? What do you say if the 202nd bottle is made wrong? Or the 203rd? When does it become too much? When do you start to think that this is a changing pattern?

What if the job was not making bottles, but something more dangerous like fireworks, or military ordnance or repairing medical breathing systems, or administering medications? Consistency has to do with showing a steady pattern of behavior and then seeing a change in the behavior or pattern.

Some things you would want to consider with this change in pattern:

- Was it a mistake, accident or an anomaly? Or was it done intentionally?
- Is it conscious or subconscious?
- Is worker “Bob” being deficient, or defiant?
- When do you act to find out?
- If something happens more than once, is it creating a pattern?

Quotes to put into practice

“Rationalization is a process of not perceiving reality, but of attempting to make reality fit one’s emotions.”

– Ayn Rand, [Philosophy: Who Needs it?](#)

“The ego is a mean mechanism which mobilizes the absolute strongest rationalization traps in order to preserve itself.”

- John Duover, [Rites](#)

Consistency is sometimes the easiest to diagnose because you can see a change in the data, patterns, and usual behaviors of people both positive and negative. If it is a positive change, how can we repeat it? If it is negative, how can we eliminate it? The hard part is finding out why there was a change. We like to tell people to use the “Rule of Two” when it comes to looking at behavior. ----->

“The Rule of Two”

The “Rule of Two” when it comes to behavior is a quick way to see if you should take some action or not.

With our example of “Bob” on this page, would you question him about the first bottle that was made wrong? Probably not, but you might pay closer attention. Yet, when the very next bottle is made wrong, would you ask “Bob” about it? Maybe, Maybe not? And then what about the third bottle being made incorrectly?



We like to say if it happens twice in a row (the rule of two) it may be the start of a pattern, and you should check it out. At least find out what happened, especially if the first few hundred or thousand times everything went as planned and was consistent.

Documenting changes in patterns of behavior or performance of employees is critical to evaluating performance.

Organizational culture is built, and changes based on what is allowed and condoned inside of the organization, and this is sometimes influenced by what we rationalize away, that maybe we shouldn't.

- Chris Fuzie, Ed.D.

Rationalizing through Distinctiveness

The process of making an attribution about a person based on how well (or poorly) he or she does on a variety of different tasks.

A new employee can do 48 of the 50 tasks required for their job correctly, but the other two are the most important, and could get people fired, or worse, hurt or killed if not done correctly.

Do we say, "Oh, well, he/she can do 48 of 50, that's 96%, which should be good enough?" What if there are 200 tasks and the employee can do 199 of them? Is one a big deal? Maybe? What if the one they can't do is the most important?" What if it is a fireman, and he can do everything perfectly except put on an oxygen mask to go into the burning building? Or a police detective who can do everything great except write reports for court? This is where we must ask ourselves if this is the critical or "distinctive" task that is required for the job?

If we rationalize away that they can do everything else, except (whatever the critical task is) what kind of situation will we be creating for our workplace?



If one of your chickens couldn't lay an egg, is that distinctive?

If you had a chicken that could lay a golden egg, isn't that distinctive?

Which behavior do you want repeated?

Should we just rationalize away the fact that we got unlucky with one chicken and lucky with the other? Or should we try to determine how/why it happened?

So, as leaders how much are you willing to rationalize away when it comes to performance or behavior?

- Is the "one thing" that you let go going to change the course of your business, or become the new pattern?
- If a pattern changes for the positive, how can you repeat it? If it changes for the negative, how do you not repeat it?
- And what if you allow one person to do something the others don't get to? Did you just create an equity (fairness) issue for yourself, your team or your organization? Or a perception of favoritism?
- How about if you rationalize away something that is unethical? Did you just condone unethical behavior by one of your people? How do you stop others from following the unethical example?
- Do you have any culpability now?



Professional Development

CMF Leadership Consulting is a leadership/followership training company which custom designs training for professional development in organizations, based on the needs of that organization.

Professional Development is a key factor for any organization to grow.

- Dr. Chris Fuzie

Putting it all together...

- As you can see by rationalizing behavior, we may be setting ourselves up for:
 - Further problems
 - Dangerous conditions
 - Poor behaviors
 - Changing organizational norms, and any number of other possibilities.
 - Whether it is through **consensus**, **consistency**, or **distinctiveness**, or a combination of these, we must look at the behaviors that are involved.
 - And all of these can impact motivation, satisfaction and performance of others, not to mention, **the bottom line!**
 - Therefore, **CMF Leadership says:**
 “Don’t let rationalizing ruin you, or your organization.”

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