

The Law of Unintended Consequences

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2009, published in the *Houston Home Journal* on December 12, 2009

The purpose of today's article is to raise your awareness. Am I encouraging you to do anything differently? Yes. Be more sensitive to the effects of your behaviors. For many of you, that means being more aggressive about seeking feedback from those you influence.

Have you ever heard of the "Law of Unintended Consequences"? I had not until recently, though I've been aware of it (probably as you have) for my entire career. Let me provide some context. Being a good leader already, your actions are typically driven from an honorable desire to do the right thing.

Occasionally, though, you'll receive some feedback from someone who tells you that something you said or did was offensive, discouraging, or disappointing. At that very moment, you might think (though you may not say), "Too bad. What I did was appropriate. If you were offended, that's your problem!"

Take a look at that situation with me. The action you took may have been driven by an honorable motive. What you intended for the organization was desirable. However, one person has risked telling you that for him, the effect was something different. That's an example of an unintended consequence.

Those things happen all the time. So, why make a big deal of it? Because most of the time, people you influence won't risk coming to you and telling you about such a situation. People often hold their disappointments and offenses inside.

We humans often expect that we are required to "suck it up" when we've been hurt. Certainly, most people don't reveal their wounds to a person of your stature. Is it possible that you are generating unintentional consequences far more frequently than you realize?

Before I offer counsel regarding what you might do differently, let me provide some higher profile examples of "unintended consequences." They often occur when a simple solution is applied to a complex problem. (Robert K. Merton, a sociology professor at Columbia University, generated the term "unintended consequences" in a research paper published in 1936.)

From 1935 to the early 1950's, the U.S. Soil Conservation Service encouraged farmers and landowners to plant kudzu, an import from Japan, for erosion control. The Civil Conservation Corps planted kudzu widely for many years. No one anticipated that its rapid growth would soon cover the Southeast.

Social Security was initiated in 1935 as part of Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal." The new program encouraged older workers to retire, providing jobs for younger employees. Further, over half of senior citizens lived in poverty; the program intended to provide food for senior citizens in the final years of life.

No one anticipated the program would be long-lived, yet it's now considered an entitlement by Americans whose life expectancy has increased by 20-30 years. Relying on Social Security as a retirement benefit, personal savings rates declined. In response, Congress introduced Individual Retirement Accounts in 1974 to encourage personal savings for retirement.

As a leader, you should be aware of the potential effects of unanticipated consequences in your organization, both from a macro and micro perspective. On a macro level, you likely have a long-term vision for your organization. In your strategic planning, have you and your colleagues considered the potential unintended effects of your initiatives?

In your daily dealings with those under your authority, do you actively seek their feedback to learn the impact of your directives and suggestions? The most effective organizations are those where feedback is actively sought and volunteered. If that's not already occurring in your organization, you are the most powerful change agent. You can enhance your organization's culture by role-modeling the behaviors.

I encourage you to consciously invite comments from individuals about how your behaviors affect them. If you've not been doing this, expect some reluctance. Even if you are openly appreciative and encouraging, many individuals will hold back their perspectives. It's human nature to be guarded.

Though you may not immediately feel the benefits of investigating for unintended consequences, your organization will be far healthier in the long run!