

Why Do People Do What They Do?

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I ask this question often. But the answers don't come easily!

When I was a kid, I used to watch Art Linkletter's "House Party. Near the end of each show, he would interview young children for a segment called "Kids Say the Darndest Things!" Well, sometimes people do the darndest things!

As a leader, wouldn't it be great to know exactly why the people in your organization do what they do? If you ask, however, they sometimes stutter and stumble, giving you a weak response.

Of course, that shouldn't be a big surprise to you. If you've ever been caught doing something that someone else thinks is weird, don't you quickly come up with an explanatory justification?

Hey, you learned when you were young that you can get out of just about anything if you can creatively find an explanation that is convincing enough. (It doesn't have to be the truth, just believable.)

Sometimes my wife will ask me, "Why did you do that?" On several occasions, I've been embarrassed to admit it, but the absolutely honest answer was, "I don't know."

How can that be? I live inside this body, and I don't even know why I acted as I did? If I'm that close to the source and can't understand even my own motivation, how can I possibly know what other people are thinking when they take action?

If you've read this far, you must be hoping I'll at least provide some clues. Well, I'll offer you two very general answers.

When I work with leadership teams, we spend a sizable amount of time thinking about how people make decisions. There are always multiple options available to anyone when facing a given situation. How do people choose from among the many possibilities?

One major factor is what we imagine will be the consequence of that action. We usually choose the option that gives the most beneficial outcome considering a reasonable cost (in terms of time, money, effort, loss of dignity, etc.).

We all have some internal, almost instinctive way of evaluating the cost/benefit ratio. Some people tend to be more risk averse than others. Considering the risk is just one way of determining the potential cost.

Willingness to risk leads us to the second general factor that influences everyone's decisions. We all have values, though we don't all have the same values. Most people aren't even able to tell you their values. (Spending the time to articulate your values is a worthwhile activity!)

Our values are always working, influencing not only what we choose to do, but also the options we'll even consider. Operating in the background, they invite us to opt out of some possibilities and they welcome us to pursue others.

Those are my answers. I postulate that people do what they do because of their values and their assessments of the probability of desirable consequences. What are your thoughts?

Dennis Hooper helps leaders build collaborative, supportive cultures. Contact him at 478-988-0237 or dhooper2@juno.com. Previous articles are available on his website: www.buildingfutureleaders.com.