

Talent On-the-Bubble: Addressing Human Behavior at Work

Bring Out Achievement Behavior

From: Emmett C. Murphy, Ph.D.

One of the great lessons from *Talent IQ* (compare prices) is that the performance of talent gone awry is very seriously under-addressed in organizational life. Called "Talent On-the-Bubble," a pattern of human behavior was identified that can take any organization and its leadership team down if left untended.

Talent on-the-bubble can make a mockery of organizational values, sap creative energy and drive highly talented top performers out. To the extent that positive energies from high achievers create a magnet of hope and achievement, talent on-the-bubble behavior constitutes an anchor of negativism, irresponsibility and contempt.

While leaders want to get to the positive side of the performance equation, to the extent they avoid taking responsibility to address the talent on-the-bubble challenge, they drop an anchor on progress and an evidentiary path of their own on-the-bubble behavior. Here's what human behavior on-the-bubble is and how to correct it.

What Is On-the-Bubble Human Behavior?

On-the-bubble human behavior is the mirror opposite of achievement behavior. Achievement is a process of moving up the ladder of responsibility for one's behavior, moving from achievement to partnership, commitment, optimism and responsibility. On-the-bubble behavior, on the other hand, moves an employee down a treacherous slope from fence-sitting to avoidance, hostility, contempt and irresponsibility.

And, where achievement is expressed through the positive paths of service, innovation and management, on-the-bubble human behavior plants weapons of explosive treachery. Instead of engagement, empathy, generosity and beneficence, guidance and responsibility in service, the on-the-bubble person plays the procrastinator, martyr, critical gossip, manipulator and backstabber. Played down this path, the on-the-bubble person systematically destabilizes the workplace, leaving a path of chaos in their wake.

And, where the Innovator moves up the ladder from seeker to knowledge leader, empowerer, discoverer, and break-through thinker, the on-the-bubble human sink hole moves from narcissist to deer-in-the-headlights, to black hole, fetalist and suicide, sucking the creative energy out of the organization in an ultimately futile act of personal sabotage.

And, perhaps most notoriously, where the fiduciary manager moves from organizing and prioritizing to bring order from confusion, to building relationship clusters to act on those priorities, to serving as a guardian for mission and values, to direct problem-solving in the front-lines to infuse hope and resolve, to heroic leadership where vision is translated into comprehensive practice, the on-the-bubble human moves from stonewalling progress to curmudgeonly avoidance, sadistic bullying, calculated bombing and, ultimately, sociopathic predation.

Examples of "On-the-Bubble" Human Behavior

What is on-the-bubble human behavior? It's *any* behavior that can compromise the achievement of an organization's mission. Ten years of research provided these 15 areas of dysfunctional behavior and how they manifest in organizations.

- Procrastinator - fence sitter; dislikes investing own energy; avoids commitment.
- Martyr - avoider; accusatory; self-righteous; blames others for own inadequacies.
- Gossip - hostile; critical of others; spreads lies; intends to harm others.
- Manipulator - contemptuous; deceives others by inventing/distorting information; convinces others to shun those he or she wishes to harm.
- Backstabber - irresponsible; fakes relationships and deceives others for a slanderous and surprise attack.
- Narcissist - fence sitter; outwardly arrogant and self-absorbed; while inwardly insecure and anxious.
- Deer in the Headlights - avoider who appears to be in a state of paralysis or shock; unwilling/unable to engage others or respond to requests.
- Black Hole - hostile; unresponsive; unproductive.
- Fetalist - inwardly contemptuous; severely withdrawn; displays zombie-like demeanor.
- Suicide - irresponsible and self-destructible; often resigns from position either formally or by failing to show up; may express repressed anger.
- Stonewaller - fence sitter; obstructionist; challenges legitimacy or need of another party for info or support.
- Curmudgeon - an avoider; makes others pay for every encounter.
- Bully - hostile, attacks someone's character or the quality of their work; threatens employees with dismissal if they don't comply with demands.
- Bomber - contemptuous; destroys others' self-confidence; publicly assaults others; undermines others' value in the eyes of the team.
- Predator - irresponsible; feeds off others' securities; uses or destroys others to increase personal power; feels confident that he or she can hunt and destroy at will.

In the first part of this article about what constitutes types of dysfunctional human behavior at work, the what and the impact of human behavior was discussed. Here, what to do about ineffective human behavior is suggested.

What Can Organizations Do About Talent "On-the-Bubble" - Human Behavior at Work?

To the extent that "Talent On-the-Bubble" is unattended, leaders consign their organizations to the will of the predator, whose operating premise is personal survival without accountability or concern for anyone or the society in which they exist.

Does this human behavioral pattern exist in your organization? Could levels of contempt and irresponsibility actually characterize the everyday experience of people's work lives? Unfortunately, to a degree more serious than typically recognized, the answer is an almost universal 'yes.' This human behavior does exist in your workplace.

So, what can be done to overcome on-the-bubble behavior? Take these six steps to build an achievement culture that manifests effective human behavior.

Steps in Developing Effective Human Behavior at Work

- First, the dysfunctional behavior must be diagnosed and shared with the “on-the-bubble” party. Discussion should center on who owns responsibility for the behavior, how the behavior manifests itself in the workplace, and the results of its negative impact on the organization. Acknowledge that all of us face stressors in life that can leverage us down the path to irresponsibility if we are not aware of the risk.
- Second, teach the concepts of achievement, that are the opposite of on-the-bubble behavior, and the options they present for behavioral change. Achievement behaviors include: playing well with others, achieving positive results through respect, self-motivation, building trust, and practicing self-discipline. Without a concrete, positive alternative, behavioral change is not possible.
- Third, create a performance improvement contract – and don’t wait for the next cycle of performance evaluation to do it, though; if it’s time for a performance development planning meeting, incorporate the contract in it.
- Fourth, stay involved and committed, not only for the benefit of the employee but, most especially, for the rest of the team and the person for whom all employees exist as colleagues - the customer.
- Fifth, take action to praise and reinforce progress.
- Sixth, separate the on-the-bubble performer if significant improvement doesn’t occur within a week or two, or they are performing at unacceptable levels of contempt and irresponsibility. If they have not yet descended to contempt, there’s a possibility of change. But, as *Talent IQ* research reveals, if positive change is to occur, it will occur very soon after the leader’s encounter. If a subject has moved into the realms of contempt and beyond, schedule a termination meeting sooner than later. Do not put the organization at any greater risk. Such behavior is a malignancy that must be excised – surgically.

In either case, move quickly and decisively. Once engaged in discussion with the on-the-bubble employee, the rest of the team will become aware and hold you, the leader, accountable for protecting achievers. To the extent you don’t take action, you will be seen as complicit in encouraging those who take the path to contempt.

The paradox of on-the-bubble behavior is the potential it offers leaders to make an unequivocal statement about their commitment and responsibility for building a culture of achievement. When leaders face on-the-bubble behavior head on, they demonstrate their own talent and the resolve they have for inspiring the highest qualities of service, innovation and leadership. In short, they demonstrate *Talent IQ*.

Talent on-the bubble can take an organization and its employees down. Improving or removing talent on-the-bubble is vital. In my 10-year study, I found that the best talent leaders intervene early, leading people on-the-bubble through a candid examination of their present ineffective human behavior, its possible progression, and its consequences.

These responsible leaders were three times as likely to turn around on-the-bubble behavior. Not surprisingly, the overall commitment of employees reporting to such leaders ran nearly 50 percent higher than it was to average leaders.