Bad Behavior, People Problems and Sticky Situations

A Toolbook for Managers and Team Leaders

By Gregg Ward

Dedicated to every manager

and team leader

who is committed to

making a positive difference.

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Introduction

About this new version: Times have clearly changed since this book was first published in 2002, and I've received both praise and feedback on it. Although the concepts and lessons still apply, it was time for me to update it to make it even more relevant for today's business environment.

Why this book? People kept asking me for it! I'm in the business of creating and facilitating interactive training programs on diversity, conflict, harassment, leadership, teamwork and change – the so-called "soft issues." I've been doing this kind of work since the mid-1980s. After almost every program a group of managers and supervisors will come up to me, tell me what a great facilitator I am (thank you!) and ask me if I have a "toolbook" that builds on the work they did with me. "We need a 'how to' manual," they say. "Something to pull off the shelf and use on-the-spot, without a lot of study or hassle."

Why do they want such a book? Well let's face it, when it comes to training on interpersonal skills, most MBA or corporate management programs fall a bit short of the mark. Sure they'll give you a lot of organizational theory, matrix, and cross-functional management gobbledygook – most of which we tend to forget the moment we leave the classroom. But when it comes to basic, everyday interpersonal interactions like talking and listening, responding to emotionalism, or handling bad behavior, people problems and sticky situations, many managers feel unprepared. They really want practical advice and help. So this is that how-to "toolbook" people keep asking me about.

What's In It? In the chapters at the beginning of the book, which I call the "Primers," I offer overviews on most of the big issues every manager needs to know about; i.e. managing and motivating people, workplace harassment, diversity and leadership. I've populated these chapters with stories taken from my own experiences working with and for many different kinds of organizations. Of course, the individual names and situations have been changed to protect the innocent…and the guilty.

The mid-section of *Bad Behavior, People Problems and Sticky Situations* is filled with basic, simple, clear and easy-to-use interpersonal management tools and techniques, most of which you can teach yourself to use in less than five minutes. The tools are laid out simply and clearly – so you can follow them step-by-step. In the last third of the book, you'll find a raft of realistic case studies – all based on actual problems my clients have faced – which you can use to develop and test your knowledge and skill.

In addition to reading the book through at least once, I'm also hoping you'll turn to it when you're facing specific bad behavior, people problems and sticky situations and wondering "What the heck do I do?!" To accommodate this use, I've arranged the book by challenge/problem and cross-referenced each one with tools to make using it that much easier. If you're in a real hurry, check the "Index by Problem."

Do The Tools Work? My clients tell me they do. Every tool in this book has been tested and tried many times in many different types of organizations, including big and small companies, city, county, state and federal government agencies, and non-profit organizations like health care groups, colleges and universities. Most people report back that the tools were simple, easy to use, and actually worked with a fairly high success rate.

Can I guarantee they'll work for you? Sorry I can't. Simply because people are human. Not everyone uses the tools exactly the same way, and not everyone responds to the tools in the same manner. However, in general, I've found if you use the tools as instructed after practicing them with a trusted colleague, the situation you're addressing will improve and/or be less stressful for everyone.

Will It Hurt? Well, that depends on your pain threshold! Seriously, there's no question that using most of these tools will require you to be clear, patient and occasionally blunt. If you're "risk" averse and/or you're constantly trying to avoid confrontations, then sure some of these tools – like "Straight Talk" – are going to be tough for you to use. But don't forget, if you're a manager, supervisor or team leader, sooner or later you're going to face some bad behavior, people problems and sticky situations that require your attention and action. These tools are designed to help get you through those situations as cleanly as possible.

What If I Need Help? It's always a good idea to ask for help or guidance from someone with experience before wading into any sticky situation. Again, I recommend you practice using these tools on a colleague before you use them in real life. When in doubt about anything, always talk to a human resources or legal professional about the problem before attempting to handle it yourself. They might take the problem off your hands or offer to let you practice using the tool on them. If you don't have an HR or legal person available to you, or one with whom you're comfortable, then work with a higher-level manager with lots of experience, people skills and street smarts. They've probably seen your problem before and can give you help and guidance.

If you get stuck, or have a specific question, or need coaching, e-mail me at gward@greggwardgroup.com, and I'll try my best to respond in 24 hours.

One Last Note. The United States is the most litigious society in the history of civilization. More people are suing each other, and their employers, for more things than ever before. As a manager or supervisor, whether you like it or not, your responsibility is greater than that of a line employee and sooner or later, you will be called upon to handle bad behavior, people problems, sticky situations and make tough decisions. The outcome of some of these problems could be challenged in court, with you sitting in a witness box or – even worse – at the defense table.

We strongly urge you to document, document, document everything you do. Whenever you get involved in handling bad behavior, people problems and/or sticky situations, make a note of the problem, the date and time, the people involved, what they said/did and what you said/did in response. In the event of a lawsuit, those notes may be your best protection.

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Primer One

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**Bad Behavior,
People Problems and
Sticky Situations…*Defined***

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Bad Behavior. A few years ago, while doing a "pulse check" (internal focus groups and private interviews) for the leadership of a large corporation, I uncovered some bad behavior that shocked even me, and I thought I'd seen it all. After receiving anonymous tips from low level employees, it became clear to me that an executive in the company's administrative group, with the help of a few colleagues, had been secretly siphoning off hundreds of thousands of dollars every year from internal expense accounts. They'd been using the money to buy expensive cars, homes and boats for themselves and their families.

When a secret internal audit confirmed my findings, the CEO decided to dismiss the executive and his cadre in one fell swoop. But the company didn't want the group tipped off in advance as to their fate. So, the CEO asked an assistant to set up a run-of-the-mill budget meeting with the executive, to see if they could trim some fat.

On the appointed day, the CEO and a team of security agents flew into town to deliver the bad news and escort the group from the building. Without warning, the offenders were called together in a conference room, terminated on the spot, and asked to clean out their personal belongings from their offices.

Now here's the shocking part: Out of the desks and closets of these folks came automatic and semi-automatic rifles, 10-inch hunting knives and a host of handguns, pistols and other military-type weapons and ammunition! Remember, this was an administrative group – literal paper-pushers – and yet they were armed to the teeth! After pausing to push up their jaws, the CEO and his security team confiscated the weapons and ejected the group from the building. This bizarre little incident helped me to realize that no matter how much experience you have, it's never safe to assume you've seen it all.

The term "Bad Behavior" refers to all those behaviors that could get the person (or people) engaging in them "on the job" in trouble with your organization or the law. Many behaviors fall into this category, from offensive language or joke-telling to theft and property destruction.

Here's a partial list:

• Harassment (including creating a hostile work environment)
• Discrimination
• Violence and fighting
• Theft of company or personal property, funds
• Retaliation against people who don't accede to unreasonable or illegal requests
• Retaliation against whistle-blowers
• Substance abuse, distribution, dealing
• Violating city, state and federal employment, environmental, and trade laws
• Gambling, racketeering
• Surfing pornographic sites on the net using company equipment; downloading and/or e-mailing pornographic and other offensive material
• Bribery and kickbacks
• Provocative, foul and/or abusive language
• Sending "hate" mail and anonymous e-mail with threats and/or hate messages
• Obstructing criminal investigations
• Inappropriate/lewd dress
• Destruction of property, arson
• Spying and/or voyeurism
• Inappropriate use of company credit cards or funds
• Fraud
• Third party harassment (outsiders harassing your employees or vice versa)

If you become aware of any of these issues there are tools you could choose to use that should de-escalate the situation or put it "on hold" until trained professionals (such as police officers and attorneys) become involved.

But everyday, run-of-the-mill bad behavior like offensive, sexually charged language or inappropriate dress, is one thing. You, as the individual manager or supervisor, may (actually, I'll say "should") be able to handle problems like these on your own. However, really bad behavior, like physical assault, threats of violence, or extortion, is another matter entirely. Unless you're a cop or firefighter, you really shouldn't try to handle these kinds of behaviors single-handedly. You're not being paid to put yourself at risk of physical injury or death. You have the right to – and should – get the heck out of any dangerous workplace situation like this and go for help.

People Problems.   Recently, I was hired by an online training company to mediate between Chuck, a client service director, and Lauren, one of his team members. The two were having trouble communicating on just about everything, and according to Chuck, she was frequently rude to him, took an inordinate amount of time responding to his calls and emails, and regularly ignored him in team meetings. It had gotten to the point that Chuck – a quiet, caring guy whom most people liked and respected – had thrown up his hands in frustration and was thinking about terminating her.

In a private, pre-mediation meeting Chuck told me that for a long time, he'd felt completely powerless and ineffectual with Lauren, but he didn't want to fire her because she did her job well. She was a "good performer," he said, a self-starter whom the clients liked. I asked Chuck if he could point to any events or incidents that had occurred between them that might explain her behavior toward him. After some thought, he recalled that a year previously Lauren had come to him with an idea to expand the training services they were offering a particular client. She asked that she be allowed to personally lead the program development effort. Chuck thought it was a great idea, but the firm's head office wanted Chuck to contract a specialist, a woman named Althea who had a Ph.D. in distance learning, to develop the new service for this client. Contracting such a specialist would enable the firm to charge the client a higher rate and increase its revenue.

So Chuck did as he was told by his boss and contracted Althea to handle the development job. He broke the news to Lauren in private, explaining the head office's bottom-line logic in as caring and as sympathetic a manner as he could. As far as Chuck could tell, she took the news as well as could be expected. A few months later, he gave Lauren a higher-than-normal bonus, and thanked her publicly for bringing in the new business. He remembered that when he told her about the bonus, Lauren didn't seem particularly enthusiastic.

During my private meeting with Lauren, I waited for her to bring up this incident, but she said nothing. Instead, she spoke in general, emotional terms, saying that Chuck was ineffectual, a "wimp" of a manager, who didn't deserve her time or respect. She spent a lot of time denigrating Chuck, nit-picking on small events that had occurred over the years, and growing more and more angry as she did so.

Finally I asked her why she was so angry with Chuck.   Sure enough, the contracting of the specialist was at the heart of it. But there

was more to the story which Chuck had neglected to tell me about. According to Lauren shortly after the head office made their decision, Chuck announced that Althea would report directly to Lauren, Althea's junior in both age and experience. A few weeks later, Lauren discovered that Althea earned at least twice her hourly rate and that the client was being billed 50 percent above this rate!

Lauren was furious about the whole affair and admitted to me that she was actively searching for a job outside of the company because of it. She said she felt that Chuck and the company had taken advantage of her and insulted her to boot by having Althea report to her. I told Lauren that I certainly understood her feelings and her desire to leave. But I added that unless she told Chuck how she felt and exactly why she was leaving, she would carry the emotional baggage from this situation into every relationship with every manager she worked for in the future. I'm no psychologist and I don't honestly know if there was any psychological truth in what I was saying, but it seemed to make sense to Lauren, and she agreed that she would feel a lot better if she could just tell Chuck everything before she left.

During the mediation session with the two of them, I asked Chuck to discuss the incident and explain his decision to have the specialist report to Lauren. Chuck said that since the new service was her idea, he believed Lauren would be very flattered by having overall responsibility for the project, and be proud of the fact that she was supervising a top specialist. Of course Lauren didn't see it that way at all, and with tears in her eyes told Chuck how Althea had completely ignored and disrespected her and how "used, insulted and patronized" the whole situation made her feel. On top of this, Lauren was convinced Althea had done a "half-assed" job on the project and had repeatedly insulted the client by ignoring their requests.

Now, I had prepared Chuck in advance for what Lauren might say, but her words and level of emotion still devastated him. He asked her why she hadn't said anything about it before and she replied she was too embarrassed. She felt it would be "unprofessional" to complain. At this point, the light bulb went on for Chuck, and he nearly broke down as he made one of the most sincere and heartfelt apologies I've ever seen a manager offer a subordinate.

Then Lauren sincerely apologized to Chuck for being so rude and disrespectful to him and for not saying something to him in the first place. She said she really liked working for the company and wanted to

stop her job search. Chuck, who'd had a hunch she was looking to leave, was delighted, and together they developed a strategy for putting their relationship back on track, upping her hourly rate, and giving her more responsibility for program development and recognition for her ideas and efforts.

Please don't misinterpret my reasons for telling you about Chuck and Lauren. I'm definitely not implying that every manager needs to know how to conduct a complex mediation like this, to bring two people together and resolve this kind of thorny people problem. (By the way, I used "The 60-minute Mediation" tool on page 69 although the process, given the complexity of the relationship and events, took much longer than 60 minutes.) But I am saying that managers need to be aware of how their decisions, actions and assumptions may impact the people on their teams. Bottom line, Chuck, as a manager, should have communicated his thoughts to Lauren throughout the process. And Lauren should have communicated hers to him.

If you are facing a difficult people problem like Chuck and Lauren's, I believe you need to be prepared to…

1. Ask the question, "What's bothering you?"
2. Manage the strong emotions that may come with the answer, and
3. Formulate a workable strategy for moving forward.

In general, the term "People Problems" refers to individual problems that employees have, or conflicts, disagreements, miscommunications and troublesome, destructive behaviors that occur between individuals and/or groups. These tend not to be explicitly prohibited by company policy, nor are illegal per se, but can be a big headache for the individuals and/or groups involved, not to mention their managers and the organization in general.

Again, this book provides you with some tools to help you to handle these things. But remember, all the tools in this book are optional. If you don't want to use them, you don't have to. If you feel uncomfortable handling a "people problem" on your own, contact someone – like an HR or legal professional, or a more experienced manager – and let him or her coach you through it.

On the next page you'll find a partial list of what I call "people problems."

- Gossip
- Affairs
- Lying
- Disparaging, disrespectful, belittling, degrading, abusive remarks or gestures
- Work stoppages/slowdowns
- Hiding/withholding information
- Subversive or undermining behavior or remarks
- Excessive after hours fraternization with subordinates
- Exclusive/prejudicial behaviors, clubs, committees and teams
- Overly competitive or negative team activities
- Constant complaining, griping, moaning, kvetching
- Laziness, slacking off, sleeping on the job
- Depression, anger, rage
- Plagiarism
- Falsifying reports, documents, time cards
- Developing and/or distributing potentially destructive software (viruses)
- Industrial espionage, giving away or selling company secrets and classified information
- Stealing customers
- Using company equipment/property for personal use/gain
- Unnecessary and/or unexcused absences or tardiness
- Favoritism
- Ignoring safety rules and regulations
- Name-calling and/or using sexist, racist, offensive, hurtful nick-names

NOTE: Some of these behaviors could eventually escalate to the point where they could be considered prohibited under your organization's policy and/or illegal. When in doubt, contact someone in HR/legal or a more experienced manager.

Sticky Situations. I first began working in the "soft issues" arena back in the mid 1980's while serving as part of a program development team comprised of police officers, psychologists, mental health experts, professors, professional actors and trainers. We were charged by the New York City Transit Police Department with developing and delivering a police officer training program on how to manage what cops call E.D.P.'s – emotionally disturbed persons.

One of my colleagues on the program development team, I'll call him Ted, was a very bright, articulate, creative and knowledgeable person with many, many years of professional experience in his field. Ted

also happened to be an extremely intense, intimidating individual who spoke rapidly, loudly and forcefully. Ted always got in your face and looked you right in the eye when he spoke to you, and regularly insisted that you didn't know your butt from a hole in the ground. In fact, he was so intense and intimidating that it made me - and some of the others on the team - uncomfortable to be around him for very long. Ted seemed like a man on a mission and nobody was going to get in his way. Yet none of us could deny that his contributions to the program were huge and extremely valuable; Ted was truly a key player.

But Ted became even more intense as the development process moved forward and we neared the launch of the training program. It got so bad I began to dread going in to the office, even though the work we were doing was fascinating, challenging and incredibly important. I began having sleepless nights, calling in sick (which I certainly couldn't afford to do), ducking out of our meetings early, and complaining to my friends and family about how difficult it was to work with Ted. Some folks told me to get used to it, "This is the big city!" they said, while others suggested I go to Ted's boss, close the door, and talk to him about it. Everyone advised against going to Ted himself. "If he's unstable," they cautioned, "there's no telling how he'll react. He could attack you!"

Now, I think you'll agree that this was one heck of a sticky situation, and ironic. Here I was working side-by-side with someone I considered to be an emotionally disturbed person while creating a program designed to help people manage emotionally disturbed persons!

And to be honest, when I couldn't take it any longer, I did exactly what the experts on our team said I should never do: I fell apart in front of him. I completely exploded at Ted one day in the hallway outside of our offices. I yelled at him, screaming that he scared the crap out of me and that I couldn't work with him anymore. I'd had it, I was going to quit the project, and nothing could stop me. I ranted and raved like this for about two minutes, and I'm pretty sure I cried at one point. And Ted, for the first time since I'd met him, didn't say a word. He just stared at me, his mouth hanging open like a fish. After I finally finished yelling, I turned on my heel to storm away from him.

Then Ted barked out my name. I froze, with my back to him. "Why the hell didn't you say something about this three months ago?!!!!!" he shouted. "I'm not a total idiot. If you'd just told me what was bothering you, I would have stopped; saved you from making a complete fool out of yourself in front of all these people!"

Only then did I realize that our colleagues were standing in their doorways, staring at me, looking just as dumfounded as Ted. I felt like crawling into the nearest hole. "Well, I guess I should have." I stammered.

"Yup, you sure should have, you big dummy" he said. "Come back into the office and we'll work it out." And we did. In fact, we worked it out so well that after a few weeks of being hyper-careful with each other, Ted and I felt comfortable enough to tease each other. "You're not gonna start crying on me now, are you Gregg?" he'd ask, deliberately turning away from me, pretending to be sensitive to my concerns. And I'd retort with "Only if you keep acting like a total idiot."

Now even though this sticky situation ended up "okay," I sincerely hope you'll never find yourself in my shoes, having to work side-by-side with someone like Ted. But unfortunately, it's possible you could be right now, and it's keeping you awake at night trying to figure out what to do. "Sticky Situations" are usually those situations where you are uncomfortable, or very concerned, or at a loss as to what to do or how to respond.

Sticky situations fall into what I call the workplace "gray zone" where nothing is totally right or totally wrong, just complex, fuzzy, troubling, frustrating, difficult or emotionally loaded. Sticky situations are sometimes the toughest things to deal with or resolve, simply because they are so damned "gray."

The best tool I can offer to help you get through sticky situations is called "The Decision Matrix" which you'll find on page 72.

Here's a partial list of sticky situations:

- Unethical business practices
- Requests for time off or overly-flexible arrangements
- Affairs
- Discovery of personal information, including medical problems
- Accidents, injuries and deaths involving employees or close relatives of employees
- Requests by employees and/or customers for preferential treatment
- Requests for transfer, salary increase, bonus or leave of absence
- Depressed or disassociative employees, colleagues and superiors
- Refusals by employees to participate in meetings, events, training or activities
- Requests from employees/customers for free goods and/or services
- Improper destruction of files/documents

- Mistakes, errors and omissions
- Stupid, inane, "knuckleheaded" comments and actions
- Deliberate obfuscation and reluctance to communicate
- Challenging, aggressive, annoying, pig-headed attitudes and comments
- Machiavellian, deceitful, undermining, sociopathic behavior
- Specific staffing requests and requests from customers for service from particular employees
- Angry, irate customers