

# learning edge



## PARTNERING WITH EXECUTIVES & MANAGERS

Tough times mean that good decision-making and skilled management are critical to retain the right talent and adapt to fast-changing markets. And yet during these times you face.....

### ...TIGHTER BUDGETS

You've got to do more with fewer resources, and conflict between functions and teams for talent and priority is fierce,

### ...LITTLE TIME

Busy with putting out fires, driving revenue, or scrambling to redirect the business, you have even less time to step back and think purposively about the conversations you have daily, and their impact on working relationships and results,

## JUST IN TIME LEARNING?

Often the most important learning comes under stress. Identifying the help you need to manage the issues in front of you allows you to target the resources you draw on, and apply the learning immediately.

Cross-Disciplinary Learning is Crucial for High Performing Execs

## Soft Skills, Hard Science, Real Results

by Sheila Heen

### CASE STUDY I 14

*Michael has been a rising star, largely because of his “no-nonsense” approach to tackling hard decisions, and re-organizing divisions. He gets results.*

*Yet he is leaving a widening swath of damaged relationships, festering resentments, and lost talent in his wake. Although he purports to take this feedback seriously, efforts to “coach” him have been largely without effect.*

## How do you like them apples?

Every division has at least one. A high performer whose intelligence, commitment, and results are beyond question. But who also clashes regularly with colleagues and goes through assistants like water. They have high standards for themselves (and others), and describe themselves as “direct.” Others are less polite in their descriptions.

These folks inadvertently create a conundrum for their managers and for the organization. On the one hand, you are loathe to let them go, because they perform beautifully against quantifiable targets like revenue, sales, or returns. And the negative feedback about them is often anecdotal, sporadic, subjective, and subject to argument - perhaps the other parties are being oversensitive or defensive? And what if the superstar is “right” on the merits of their argument,

even though they could have exercised more interpersonal skill? Yes, perhaps they didn't put it as tactfully as they might, but they often have a point.

Until recently, this debate has often been framed as “objective results” vs. “subjective opinions.” But increasingly the “subjective opinions” are starting to be borne out in hard science.

### Is Behavior Actually Contagious?

It may be.

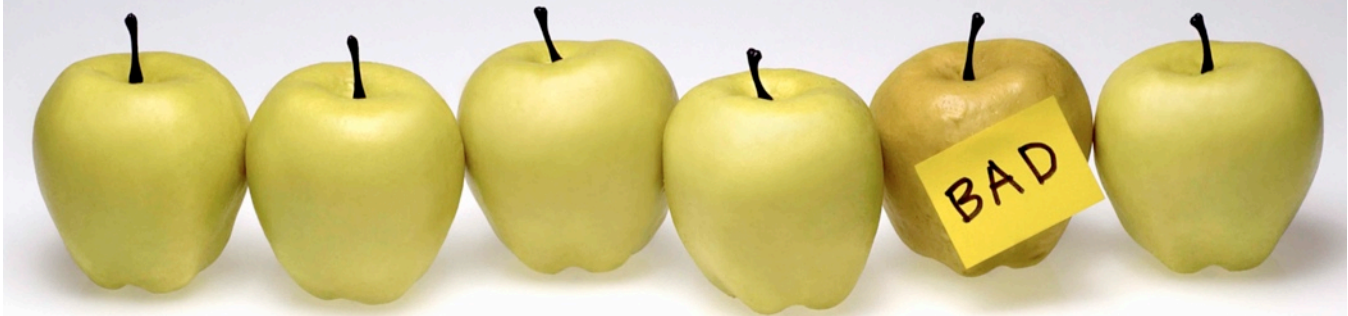
Will Felps at the Rotterdam School of Management recently set out to find out.

And to make the investigation even more interesting, Felps decided to measure the impact of bad behavior on the quantifiable results that a team achieves. Does bad behavior and the subjective experience of team members affect quantifiable results?

To find out, Felps created four-member teams and assigned each to complete a 1-hour task. Teams were promised a \$100 payout to each individual on the winning team.

Recognizing that “bad behavior” comes in a number of forms, Felps mixed it up. On half the teams, Felps planted an actor, with instructions to display behavior typical of a “jerk,” (“that's a stupid idea,” “do you know anything?”), a slacker (“whatever;”), or a depressive (absorbed with trying to manage their own depressed mood). Then he videotaped each team during the hour in which they completed the task together.

The results surprised even Felps.



Teams infected with the badly behaving actor produced results that were, on average, 40% worse than the control groups without.

What's striking is the speed with which this behavior became contagious. With only an hour to complete the task, the gradual process many managers observe over weeks or months accelerated. Collaboration broke down, momentum derailed, progress limped along, morale dropped. In one case, the actor put his depressed head down on the table. By the end of the hour, the entire team sat, heads on table, motionless.

### There goes the barrel

Sometimes bad behavior is cloned by others on a team. More often the bad behavior prompts adaptive behavior in others as they struggle to cope with a difficult teammate. In Michael's case, his volatility and frequent frustration meant that people avoided giving him bad news, or found ways to work around him. After difficult meetings, they would congregate behind closed doors to complain to each other about how impossible he was. Increasingly, they talked *about* him, rather than *to* him.

### Comparing Apples and....People

Felps refers to this as his "bad apple" study. The term's connotation suggests that the bad behavior is either intentional, or the result of bad character - a rotting core. The only answer is then to throw out the bad apple, before it spoils the whole barrel.

When working with people in the real world, it's critical to remember that what is "catching" is the *behavior* involved, not bad character. And the bad behavior is often unconscious and unintended. The impact Michael is having on others is largely invisible to him, particularly because his

teammates complain to each other rather than talking to *him*.

This is one of the things that makes addressing the behavior challenging - the person exhibiting the behavior can't see the impact they are having on others. Even when the impact is described, it is often dismissed as "an overreaction" or "misunderstanding." It is genuinely difficult for them to appreciate the emotional impact second-hand.

### What Doesn't Work

Previous feedback to Michael had focused primarily on the problematic behavior (shouting, calling people out in meetings, curt, or rude email exchanges). This left Michael feeling unfairly blamed and defensive.

Meaningful change is going to require change not just by Michael, but also by the teammates. The team's reactions to Michael - e.g., withholding bad news -- actually perpetuate exactly the behavior they don't like. It means Michael is often surprised by information, triggering an outburst. It means he feels "alone" in trying to drive results, becoming demanding and tyrannical.

### Getting to the Core

Michael and the team need more "direct" engagement about the rut they are in. These conversations need a critical handful of skills at their core:

1. An assumption that *we're all contributing to the current dynamic*, including team members who aren't speaking up with Michael directly.
2. Willingness to assume that *everyone is acting out of good intentions*, (trying to cope effectively) but may be having a bad impact on each other,
3. *Curiosity about the parts of the picture I can't see* - how my decisions and actions impact others.

4. *Patience with each other* as they work to change habits that take time to shift.

The "bad apple" study, and the link between behavior and results, got Michael's attention. It also helped the team see that their adaptive behavior was part of the picture as well. It won't be an easy road, but they are, with some help, starting to break some of these patterns.

No more bad apples here.

### About Us

At Triad, we have always integrated the latest research into our practice working with senior management.

For those who tend to be skeptical of soft skills, drawing on the latest learning about brain circuitry, emotional processing, behavior change, and the effect on bottom line outcomes can be transformative. They suddenly see the link between the soft skills, and the performance of their team.

For more information about Triad, drop in on our website: [www.diffcon.com](http://www.diffcon.com), or give us a call to see how we can help you and your organization. It all starts with a conversation.

For more information about the research discussed here, see: Felps, W., Mitchell, T. R., & Byington, E. (2006). *How, when, and why bad apples spoil the barrel: Negative group members and dysfunctional groups*. Research in Organizational Behavior, Volume 27, 181-230.