

## HOW UNETHICAL ACTIONS UNDERMINE OUR EFFECTIVENESS

*"You can't go against the image you have of yourself and your opinion about what you think is right without feeling bad"*

*Ken Blanchard*

When any of us tries to reach a goal, we find ourselves working in four key areas that could be called the "areas of living"

The first area is "Personal care and self-improvement". Doing well in this area means eating well, personal hygiene, resting, healing yourself when you're sick, exercising to stay fit. It also means studying to increase your professionalism and doing things that bring you satisfaction (hobbies, entertainment, buying a new car, etc.). Each individual has a special interest in taking care of him/herself. Taking "recreational" drugs would be an example of doing a negative action in this area.

The second area of living is "Care and improvement of one's family". Each of us has a definite interest in taking care our family, be it our family of origin (if we still live with our parents), or a new family that we have created through our relationship with another person. Each of us knows that harmony and peace in the family is an important part of being effective and doing well in life. For example, however well things may be going in my professional sphere, if I continued to neglect my children I will inevitably feel a sense of emptiness, a feeling of being incomplete in some way, and it would be like an open wound that constantly aches, as any parent reading this will know. No matter how much I may give the impression of being happy and successful, there would always be a part of me that hurts and makes me less efficient.

The third area of living is "Care and improvement of one's company or team" Now, not all of us are business owners, so this third area needs to be clarified a bit better. Each of us, in order to be happy, must take part in a group effort, that is, we must pursue an objective together with other people. Individuals who are confined to a position where they are disconnected from the goals of a greater group, without the possibility to dream together with other people in the pursuit of an important and valuable goal, will always have a void in their life: the feeling that something is missing. Though they may try to make up for it with other "fun" activities, it will never make up for the lack of fulfillment that comes from pursuing a valuable goal with others. It's like someone who reaches middle age without ever having had a girlfriend or boyfriend: however much they try to compensate for this with other activities, they will always feel haunted by an undeniable void. It's almost impossible to be truly happy without taking part in a group effort to achieve an important goal. This alone tells us a lot about why a worker who merely "puts in their eight hours" without truly being dedicated to the company goal is generally frustrated and unsatisfied, not matter what they may say to the contrary.

The fourth area of living is named in its broadest sense: "Social" or "caring for society and people around us." This is not about how often you donate blood to the Red Cross, donate to charity, or volunteer as a firefighter. What it does mean is that, in order to feel complete in our lives, each of us should take care of other people, not because of family, business obligations, or because we'll get something out of it, but simply because they're human beings like us. This doesn't necessarily require us to engage in charity or volunteer activities. However, it requires that each of us realizes the importance of helping others purely for that purpose and without ulterior motives. You will find that people who contribute significantly to the welfare of others or of society without expecting anything in return (financially or

emotionally) are generally doing well and, thanks to these activities, are equipped with an emotional stability that makes them stronger than the others.

Figure 1: The four areas of life



Functioning well in each of the four areas of living provides us with the stability and energy each of us needs in order to make a difference. It is difficult to perform at our best when some of our life areas have been neglected for a long time.

### AREAS OF LIVING AS COMMUNICATING VESSELS

When I'm dealing with business owners or professionals, I often hear the phrase "I keep my private life and professional life separate", or "what happens in my private life does not in any way affect my professional sphere" and so on. They are lies. In fact, no matter how much you might insist that you keep things separate, these four areas are like communicating vessels filled with water. You can not commit a harmful act in one of these four areas of living without it being reflected in a negative way in the others. Every time we commit a negative or damaging action in any one of the four areas, it's as if we put a drop of black ink into one of the communicating vessels, and sooner or later that one drop of ink will spread to each of the connecting vessels, staining all of the water black.

For example, let's say last night I drank a whole bottle of Jack Daniels. Not a couple of glasses, but an entire bottle. Right away we can agree that this is not a beneficial act for my first area of living (my liver certainly doesn't think it is). This morning, when I go to write my book, I'm not particularly alert, I have a headache, and my reflexes are a bit slow. I could probably force myself to write, but despite the many myths about how writers use alcohol for inspiration, I honestly wouldn't do a very good job. The drop of ink has already seeped into my third area of life, my professional sphere, but it won't stop there.

Now, not having achieved much at work, when I get home tonight I'm not as enthusiastic or happy as I usually am. Instead I'm rather depressed. I get home and my wife happens to be having a problem with something. She's a bit annoyed, and she comes to me for a bit of reassurance and motivation: she's been looking after our five month old daughter, and it was a very frustrating day. Though I'm usually able to calm people and get a smile out of them, today I simply don't feel up to it. If anything, this feels like yet another problem and I find myself snapping back or taking it personally. The drop of ink has now spread to my family sphere.

Figure 2: The four areas of living are like communicating vessels filled with water.



*Every time you commit a harmful act in one of the four areas of living, it's as if we put a drop of black ink into one of the communicating vessels: slowly, but surely, it will spread to all the other areas, making us less efficient.*

It is therefore important to more closely examine the effects that these "ink drops" (representing the negative actions that we commit) can have on our lives and on our efficiency when we are trying to accomplish goals.

### **DROPS OF INK AND THEIR EFFECT ON COMMUNICATING VESSELS**

First, we must give a definition of what we mean by a "harmful", "unethical", or "inefficient" action. In the previous chapter we said that an unethical action is one that violates our fundamental principles as human beings. Generally each of us can "feel" when an action we are committing is unethical.

But if we limit ourselves to this definition, we would leave too much room for personal feelings and opinions, which, as we well know, are not always objective.

Without entering into long philosophical discussions about what is right or wrong, we will expand the definition of a harmful, unethical, or inefficient action as follows:

1. Any action we commit against someone else that we would not like done to ourselves.

Unethical or inefficient actions can be one of two kinds, those done by commission (intentionally doing something negative), or omission (not doing something that should have been done). An example of an unethical act of commission might be punching someone in the face or stealing money. An unethical or inefficient act of omission might be failing to dedicate the proper amount of care and attention to your work.

2. An unethical action can also be when you violate an agreement you made with someone else.

For example, if you and I had a deal, and I don't respect that deal, I will be committing an unethical or inefficient<sup>1</sup> action.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term "inefficient" to distance ourselves from something that is, or may be, considered morally wrong. Whether or not you personally consider them morally wrong, harmful actions or actions that violate agreements are, at the very least, inefficient.

Agreements can be "explicit" (where things are specifically identified and understood) or "implicit" (where, even without clearly identifying each aspect, they are understood without saying).

Every day our lives are filled with numerous explicit and implicit agreements, and when we violate them we are committing an unethical action.

All of us, at some point in our lives, have committed unethical or inefficient actions. What is more, anyone who claims to be the height of virtue, someone who seriously (maybe contemptuously) insists that they are perfect with no stain upon their soul is usually a person who, behind this facade of respectability, actually commits unethical acts left and right every day.

Each of us, in the course of our life, is faced with a number of important ethical dilemmas: is this the right or wrong thing to do? Sometimes the solution isn't easy, and sometimes, because we're only human, we make mistakes. It happens to everyone, not just me and you.

So what do you do when you realize you've done something unethical or inefficient?

When we do something inefficient, the most sensible thing that each of us can do is to take responsibility, self-correct and, where possible, inform the injured person of the mistake made.

In fact, as we will see, attempting to hide the unethical or inefficient action activates a series of psychological mechanisms in the guilty person, automatically (even if you know what to look for, it's unavoidable) and unconsciously (you won't even realize it's happening) that will make them much less effective in the area where they have accumulated these transgressions.

## **THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF UNETHICAL OR INEFFICIENT ACTIONS**

Let's say that you're taking part in the second day of my training course, where I address the importance of goals in your life and profession. Let's pretend that this morning, while I'm looking for a parking spot outside the course venue, I accidentally bump into your car and damage it. I get out of my car, look at what I've done, and think "Wow, what a mess, that's at least two thousand dollars in damages." While I wring my hands in regret, I look around and realize that there's no one around. So I jump in the car, park two blocks away, and go into the training as if nothing has happened. I feel an uncomfortable tug at my conscience, but all in all, thinking of having to pay those two thousand dollars, I persist in my decision to pretend nothing has happened. Then I start the second day of the training.

We can all agree that the above action would be unethical or at least inefficient. Let us now examine what psychological mechanisms my mind will automatically activate (without my being aware of it) if I were to refuse to take responsibility for what I did or self-correct.

### **THE FIRST MECHANISM**

At 10:00 a.m. I start the course.

At 11:00 a.m. we take a break and you realize that you forgot your phone in the car. Uh oh...

You run out to your car to get it. When you get back, you'll probably start complaining because someone scratched your car and didn't even leave a note.

What will I be going through while I listen to you complain about how someone damaged your car? We can all agree that I will feel at least a bit of anxiety, a bit worried, the situation is starting to get tense and I hope you don't find out it was me.

We can also agree that an anxious individual is less effective than a calm one. But let's say that I, the master of "unethical or inefficient actions", decide that it is better to continue to keep my mouth shut about the situation. After all, I'd look like such a jerk if I said something now...

Around noon, while I am talking about goals, I see you suddenly "light up" (you've had an epiphany) as you think to yourself "Paolo is absolutely right! I don't have any goals in my life, no wonder I'm not motivated." And while you are thinking these thoughts you stare at me intensely. What does this make me think?

"Oh no, he knows it was me." My anxiety increases ...

However, let's assume that, upon seeing how agitated you've become, I use all my strength to concentrate even more on what I'm doing and I'm able to carry on with the training.

At 12:30 p.m. I ask everyone in the room to do an exercise: "Write down what you've learned about goals and how to apply it in your work." During the exercise, I move around the room and check on what people are writing. When I reach your paper I realize that you've written a number of things that are incorrect. I open my mouth to explain how you could improve it, but just as I start to speak you look at me (nothing special, just paying attention to me). What do I do then?

I will be so uncomfortable that I'll probably end up saying something like: "It's not perfect, but overall it's okay", in other words I'll say whatever gets me out of this embarrassing moment as quickly as possible. Conversely, I may even respond angrily or explode. Either way I certainly won't be giving you constructive feedback.

The fact that I'm trying to conceal an unethical action that I committed, REDUCES MY ABILITY TO INFLUENCE OR IMPROVE YOU. The reason is simple: to influence a person we must have the ability to focus most of our attention on that person (you'll realize this particularly when you're trying to sell something, if you're dealing with a customer and simultaneously thinking about other things, you fail to focus on the customer and in the end are unable to close the sale).

When I'm hiding a transgression or an inefficient action, most of my attention is focused on me, on making sure I'm not found out, on behaving "naturally", and I have little attention left for you in that fashion. I will have a hard time in making a difference or in influencing you.

Obviously, being withdrawn (and thus superficial) is just one of many ways I could react. I might get mad at you, attack you (it happens), but anything I do all boils down to one common denominator: I can get angry or argue my point of view, but I won't be able to make a difference in that situation. My concentration is on the defensive (don't get caught), rather than the offensive (make a difference and get a positive result).

But there is also another point. The fact that, in the presence of a hidden unethical or inefficient action, not only will I have difficulty influencing you (the target of my suboptimal action), but after a while it will also extend to other people who have to do with the area of my harmful action.

Indeed, at 3:50 p.m. someone else in the room has an epiphany: she thinks the speech I'm giving about goals is really fantastic and exactly what she needs to work on in her company. And while she thinks this she stares at me intently... and we're off again: "Oh God, maybe she saw me. I knew it, I knew I felt someone watching me when I moved the car...". Thus we see that the mechanism also extends to others: in the presence of an unethical or inefficient action that I'm hiding, my stress level increases and starts to cause difficulties in my ability to influence anyone who has to do with the area of my transgression.

Try to imagine yourself in this kind of situation: if you did something suboptimal in respect to one of your clients (we're all only human, sometimes we make mistakes) and when you go to visit them you try to hide it, how do you feel? Are you truly effective when you're with them, or do you tend to be a bit more superficial?

How do you feel when the police stop you for a document check and you know you weren't wearing your seatbelt? Perhaps they haven't said anything about the seatbelt yet, and simply asked for your license and registration. You become so introverted that you practically move like a robot. And if they let you go without say anything or giving you a ticket, you feel relieved: "That sure was a close call" and let out a big sigh (a gesture to release tension). Goal achieved: I didn't get caught. When you hide an unethical action or the violation of an agreement, your attention and your goal is limited to just that: don't get caught. It goes no deeper than that.

The moral is simple: seatbelts save lives.

Just kidding.

Of course, wearing our seatbelts is an act of responsibility not only to ourselves but also to the other people who depend on us (children, family, etc.). But the real moral is that when you perform an unethical action (it happens, believe me, no matter how much we try to present ourselves as "Super Paolo", "Super Jennifer", etc., etc. we are still human and we often make mistakes), the most efficient thing to do is to take responsibility for it and correct our mistake. By refusing to accept responsibility and concealing transgressions or inefficient actions we just start sliding down a slippery slope.

Let's look at another example: when you have to deal with someone and you know you're hiding something from them, 1) are you truly going to be effective with them? and, 2) even if you do manage to be effective, how is your relationship with that person going after a couple weeks? Has it worsened or improved? At the very least it will start to cool. You'll visit them less and less, and start being more reactive with regards to them rather than pro-active<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Reactive and Proactive: When we are "reactive" we tend to react to the suboptimal behavior of other people, it sets us off, it seems that other people have the power to make us angry or give us grief. Meanwhile, when we are "proactive", we interact with events in a much more purposeful and constructive way. We have greater self-control and even if someone else's behavior is suboptimal, we are inclined to control our reactions in order to achieve a positive goal for everyone involved.

The first consequence of an unethical or inefficient action, if we don't take responsibility and don't immediately correct our behavior, is as follows: we have much greater difficulty being proactive and able to influence the people we deal with in the area of transgression.

Of course we could point out that, in the example of the car incident, if it had occurred in a public car park in Detroit, where I know very few people, it would still be morally reprehensible (and would still have consequences, as we shall see later), but this first mechanism wouldn't be activated.

Instead, this particular problem arises when we transgress in our agreements or commit unethical actions against people we interact with often or every day. Indeed, we will begin to have great difficulty in influencing them. We become reactive with them and not as effective, and our stress levels start to rise.

It is no coincidence that Dr. Bennett, in an article published in the Wall Street Journal<sup>3</sup> referring to a study on managers and executives, pointed out that managers who achieved higher scores on tests related to ethical behavior were also much more emotionally stable and less stressed than those who obtained lower scores on these tests.

If this were the only problem we may still limp along well enough. We would just be a bit more stressed out and have some difficulty coping with certain people. Some of our relationships (perhaps even some of the important ones) would cool or become a bit more volatile. But let's assume that I'm capable and strong enough to cope with these problems and survive with these "small" drawbacks.

But concealed unethical or inefficient actions activate yet another mechanism that is even more devastating.

## **THE SECOND MECHANISM**

To understand this second mechanism of hidden unethical or inefficient actions, we will consider another example. Let's assume that I need to teach a course at the company where you work and don't prepare well. It is clear that this action is unethical; it violates an agreement that, while not specifically mentioned in the contract, was still implicit: if I am a trainer, then I have to be properly prepared for the courses I hold.

The course is on Tuesday. Fridays are very busy for me, so I decide I will prepare Saturday morning. On Saturday morning though, I get up a little later than usual, and while eating breakfast I start reading the newspaper. I find some articles that interest me and keep reading for an hour and a half. I know I should be preparing myself for the course, but then I think: "I've been working like a madman all week, I deserve a moment to relax." Even so, while I'm reading I have a nagging feeling that I should be preparing because I gave my word that it would be a great course. But I put it off again because, after all, I still have Monday. I'll just get up early Monday so I have time to do it.

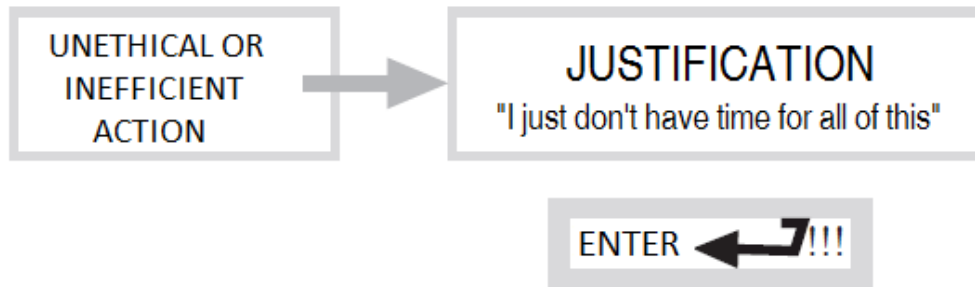
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<sup>3</sup> "Unethical Behavior, Stress Appear Linked", Wall Street Journal, April 11, 1991, p. B1.

On Monday I get up a bit earlier (though not as early as I had planned), but then there's a lot of traffic and I actually end up coming into the office a bit late. By this time I have appointments with other people who have specifically come to meet with me (formerly agreed commitments).

Knowing that the course date is approaching and that I'm not preparing like I should, we can all agree that throughout Monday I will experience some discomfort. I'll know I am violating an agreement. If I don't practice some self-control in this situation, forcing myself to behave in an ethical manner (like cancelling one of my less important appointments so I have time to prepare, or even postponing the date of the course because I know I won't be giving them good service), what will my mind do automatically?

It will start inventing excuses!!! Reasons for why my behavior isn't really that bad. For example: "I just don't have time for all of this. I don't have time to do everything that everyone asks for. What do they expect? I can't prepare myself thoroughly every time. Good grief, I'm not a miracle worker."



With this justification, I just wrote a line of code and entered it into my operating system (my mind). Sooner or later this software will start to take effect.

After a few days, I get up one morning with the immediate impression of not having time. But is this really true??? No! It just feels like it because I NEED TO NOT HAVE ENOUGH TIME in order to justify my unethical or inefficient action!!!

The second mechanism of unethical actions is that WE ALWAYS FIND A WAY TO MATERIALIZE THE JUSTIFICATION FOR OUR UNETHICAL ACTIONS, and by doing so we become less capable!

This consequence of unethical actions is so important and so deadly that we really have to look at some other examples.

Suppose I'm a business owner who has hired a receptionist who is doing really badly. My role, the implicit agreement I have with the other members of my team (the salespeople who pound the pavement to ensure new customers call the company, the marketing manager who works after hours to develop new campaigns, etc.), requires me to do something, even if it just means assigning this person to another position where they can do no harm. Let's say I don't do my part, and simply justify it away by saying "yeah, well, it's hard to find good people." *Enter* (the justification I inserted in my operating system). Six months later I meet a friend of mine and he points out how rude my receptionist is. What do I tell him? "Oh well, you know it's not easy to find good people around here..." (I repeat the justification). To which my friend says: "Really? I put up an ad last month and I received 65 applications,



some of which were really skilled...". I will continue to insist that it's not that easy though (still repeating my justification). And do you know why? BECAUSE I *NEED* IT TO BE HARD TO FIND PEOPLE, OTHERWISE I'LL BE FORCED TO CONFRONT THE DISCOMFORT THAT COMES FROM COMMITTING AN UNETHICAL OR INEFFICIENT ACTION!!!

**We always tend to materialize any justification we establish for our unethical actions and make them a reality!!!**

Take another example. Suppose that, during a trip abroad for work, I wake up one morning in the "wrong hotel room". Not in my own room, but in that of the Polish supermodel staying in the same hotel. Definitely not an action that I would appreciate my wife doing to me. It's an unethical action.

When I wake up, thinking about what I did, and then thinking about my wife, I'll feel uncomfortable even if it's only for a split second. If I don't use self-control, if I don't realize that I've been done something incredibly stupid, and if I don't attempt to correct myself, my mind will relieve this discomfort by automatically providing me with any excuse it can think of: "Well, my wife has been so cold lately...". "Enter".

Now when I go home and I interact with my wife, I convince myself that she's acting coolly towards me. But has she really started giving me the cold shoulder? NO SIR! I need her to be cold, otherwise the discomfort from my previous unethical action will start to gnaw at me again.

So we could summarize the second mechanism of hidden unethical or inefficient actions (or actions for which you refuse to take responsibility) as follows: WE ALTER OUR PERCEPTION OF OUR ENVIRONMENT TO FIT OUR NEED TO JUSTIFY THE ACTION WE HAVE COMMITTED!!! Take a moment to think this, because it is a devastating mechanism!!!

A salesperson knows that there is a customer he hasn't visited in a long time. It's a difficult, very demanding, customer. However, in the past, with some effort, the salesperson has always been able to handle them with a series of orders. When the salesperson acquired this customer, he reeled off impressive claims of loyalty, about how much he cared about the company, how he would help, etc. etc. Thereby establishing a whole series of implicit agreements. While driving around in the customer's area, the salesperson thinks about visiting them, but then thinking about all the objections they will surely make and the effort that will be required to overcome them, he ends up deciding to put them off a little longer. Doing so makes him feel uncomfortable, but then his mind provides a convenient excuse: "they don't buy much anyway." "Enter".

Six months later he still hasn't yet visited the client. The client even tried looking for him at his office once, but somehow an appointment was never fixed. The sales manager checks in and asks our salesperson about this client, and how does he respond? "They don't even buy anything!", and at this point it has become a truth. He altered his perception of that client so he could live with the fact of having committed an inefficient action. Meanwhile, that customer has already placed a number of orders with a competitor.

Now that you know about this mechanism, you'll realize that people who tell you they "don't have time", that "good people are too hard to find", that "it's just so difficult to build a happy family", that there's a recession, and so on, have simply altered their perceptions of their environment, and are doing

nothing more than creating excuses to justify their unethical actions (perhaps small actions, but unethical nonetheless) bit by bit completely altering our perception of our surroundings.

So now for the million-dollar question: "Look at the environment around you now. Do you see it as it ACTUALLY IS, or do you see all the excuses you've established over the years to make it so?"

The second mechanism of harmful actions or actions for which we refuse responsibility, occurs through the justifications that we use to alter our perception of the environment and the people around us, making us less effective and less capable.

For the sake of argument though, let's say we still manage to limp along, despite being less effective. Does it really matter in the end? True, there are some people we are no longer able to influence, we have partially altered our perception of the environment and have become a bit less capable, but all in all we are strong people and can still manage, with some effort, to move forward. Is that really so problematic?

However, there is still a third mechanism that is activated by unethical or inefficient actions.

### **THE THIRD MECHANISM**

Let's go back to the first unethical action I committed (the one where I hit your car without telling you anything). Focus on that incident for a moment.

While I'm parking my car farther away, so you don't find out it was me, what do I feel (even if it's just for a second)? We can all agree that, for at least a split second, I'll experience a feeling of "guilt."

What will my mind automatically do if I don't take responsibility for what I've done nor do something to remedy the situation? If you really pay attention to what happens in that split second after the feeling of guilt, you'll notice that my mind, in order to reduce the feeling of guilt, will hand me a list of all YOUR defects on a silver platter: how you interrupted me several times during the course the day before, that one time you were grumpy with me and didn't pay me more attention, how you still owe me a favor, and so on. None of these things bothered me at all before I committed this unethical or inefficient action against you. They were "flaws" that simply tolerated, but now, having committed a harmful action, my mind will give each of these a much greater importance IN ORDER TO REDUCE MY FEELING OF GUILT!

So, while I'm driving my car to park farther away, for a split second I feel a sense of guilt and then IMMEDIATELY my mind begins to offer me these defects, which lead me to think: "Yeah, but he's always making a nuisance of himself during the course..." OR "well, there was that one time when he wasn't very polite to me." In other words, in the absence of accountability for what I have done, my mind will tend to bring out your negative qualities in order to play down my negative action. What does this lead to? I'll tend to become overly critical towards you!!!

So, when people are overly critical of you, it is very likely (I don't want to generalize here because I don't like absolutes) because they did something THEMSELVES against you and not vice versa. This is a real 180 compared to what is commonly believed. When someone, despite your various attempts to remedy

the situation, remains very critical towards you, you naturally tend to assume that it is because you yourself have done something wrong.

In reality it's the EXACT OPPOSITE! They are the ones who have done something against you and, to diminish what they have done, they need to find or magnify your defects or actions against them.

A worker removes some tools from the company where he works and takes them home. How does he justify this unethical action to himself? He starts listing all the ways his company has wronged him. He justifies it by magnifying all of the company's defects and increasing the weight of these wrongs. "They don't pay me enough" (and therefore it is only fair that I take home the Black & Decker...), "They treat me badly", etc, etc. It could be that there is also some truth in what he says. But the problem is that after committing the unethical action, HE WILL NO LONGER BE WILLING TO REMEDY THE SITUATION, TO FIND A POSITIVE SOLUTION WITH THE COMPANY. He will need, from that moment onwards, for the company to continue to treat him badly, even if the opportunity arises to solve the situation!

In another book I have published I explain that, while living in the US, I had a girlfriend (a serious relationship) who cheated on me. She was always criticizing me no matter what I did. Sometimes even resorting to nitpicking and splitting hairs. For weeks I indulged her, agreeing to her stupid whims with the result that once I fixed one thing, she simply criticized me for something else. This continued until one day I changed my point of view: "Could it be that YOU are the one who's doing something I don't know about?" This led me to discover a bitter truth, but it was still better than going insane trying to keep up with the criticism of someone who needs to justify what they have done to you.

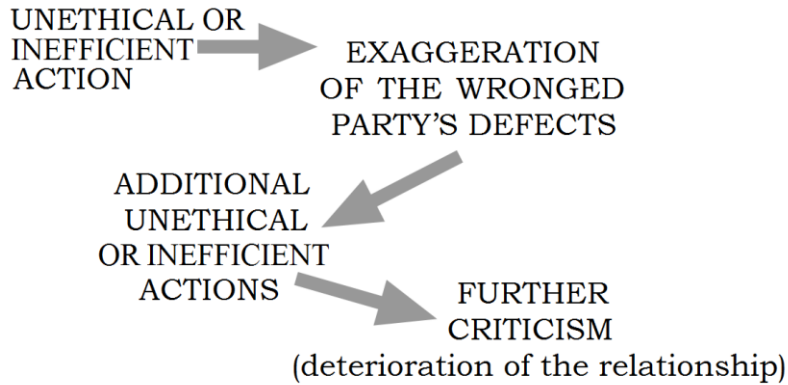
If you see a police officer arresting a thief, what do you think?

I'm pretty sure that you would say "Oh. Good. Lucky that police officer was around." But let's assume that I show the same scene to an individual who has been in and out of prison for years and presumably has numerous unethical actions that they are hiding from the police. What would they say about the scene? Something critical, such as "Another dirty cop, just look at them! How can they get away with treating someone like that..."

This mechanism is very similar to the second mechanism of the unethical or inefficient action, but with a few specific distinctions.

We commit an unethical or inefficient action against a person: to justify it or to reduce our guilt we alter our perception of the person we have injured, magnifying or dramatizing some of their shortcomings. In this way the guilt in our minds is reduced, BUT FROM THEN ON WE ARE NO LONGER ABLE TO HELP THE PERSON WE ARE CRITICIZING TO MANAGE OR OVERCOME THESE FAULTS, EVEN IF THE CHANCE TO DO SO PRESENTS ITSELF. In regards to this person, we become "reactive" to the highest degree.

Sometimes this third mechanism begins with a small failure on our part. This leads us to become somewhat critical of the person we have wronged. Focusing so much on their faults then provides us with reasons for committing further negative actions against them, which don't seem so bad compared to their defects. These in turn lead us to be even more critical. Soon we trigger a chain reaction that leads us to commit more and more negative actions against that person, and to become more and more critical.



If, for example, I betray my wife, after the betrayal I will tend to enhance or magnify her flaws. They were before the betrayal they were present, but they didn't bother me so much, somehow I managed to handle them and even helped her to overcome them. After my betrayal though, these defects become things I simply can't stand anymore, they start to bug me (to quote Stephen Covey: I've gone from "proactive" to "reactive"). Now, because in my mind my wife has so many flaws, or defects, or is treating me badly, I will be "justified" in committing further negative actions against her. Soon my marriage will go down the drain.

It is no coincidence that, after experiencing some deterioration in their sense of ethics, people end up become much more grumpy, reactive and difficult to manage.

To summarize this third mechanism: when we commit unethical or inefficient actions against someone (either hurting them unjustly, or violating an express or implied agreement we have with them) we lose the ability to influence them, become overly critical of them, focus our attention on their faults, on what they do wrong, and thus become less and less effective in our human relations. Excessive criticism is rooted in unethical or inefficient actions committed against the person being criticized.

Of course I do not want to generalize. In fact, there might be situations where you simply work for a tyrant, or, if you are a manager, an employee is just really negative and our criticism is justified. But be very careful. Before labeling someone as a tyrant or negative, ask yourself: is there anything I've done to that person that I'm keeping hidden? In doing so, hold back your justifications: while you're thinking about these things your mind will ceaselessly try to provide as many as possible. You must have the strength to look at reality and not excuses. I can't assure you that doing this simple exercise will change the person with whom you're having difficulties, but, believe me, it often helps you see things from a completely different (and much more constructive) point of view.

### **CHANGE YOUR BELIEFS IN ORDER TO CHANGE RESULTS**

If we want to achieve better results in any area of life where we're not excelling we need to change some basic assumptions that we believe to be right, but are in fact incorrect.

As you may well realize, most people in society have completely wrong assumptions with regards to the maintenance of ethical behavior. Many people when they benefit unfairly from someone else, they think "awesome, I got away with it", "I got paid even though I didn't do the work ", "I cheated on my

wife with a beautiful girl, the guys are going to love this story", "I had a car accident, it was totally my fault, but check this out: I convinced my insurance company that someone else rear-ended me and they covered the damage anyway", etc., etc. They think, in a few words, that those who commit unethical actions without getting caught are really clever and lucky. What they do not know is that, although they weren't caught, they will still pay sky high in consequences for what they have done: increased stress, reduced ability to influence others, impaired perception of their environment and of the people around them, with the result of becoming much less efficient.

All of these ink droplets inside the communicating vessels, a little at a time, bring a person to a situation where their life will be so "messy" that nothing seems to be going right.

When you perform an unethical or inefficient action, it's like you're writing a check: even if you're never caught, sooner or later, somehow, that check will be cashed (i.e. you will pay the consequences).

### **THE INFLUENCE UNETHICAL ACTIONS HAVE ON OUR EFFECTIVENESS**

The three mechanisms mentioned above add up to a loss of effectiveness in each of the communicating vessels that have been polluted and even a loss of self-esteem, resulting in the person's inability to stay motivated for their goals.

In your opinion, how productive can a person be when they are highly stressed, argumentative in their relations with others, and have altered their perception of the environment in order to justify their suboptimal actions?

You are quite right: the productivity of such a person would be far from excellent.

In fact, one of the consequences of unethical or inefficient actions is that the productivity of an individual begins to drop. It doesn't necessarily vanish entirely, it simply starts experiencing a decline. Even if the unethical action has been committed within the family or a personal relationship, sooner or later, like a drop of ink, that unethical action will influence the productivity of the person in their professional sphere.

For many years I have worked as a consultant in the field of HR productivity, and I have invariably noted this fact: after an individual loses their sense of ethics, after the individual transgresses the internal values that characterize them, no matter how many excuses they come up with, their productivity falls.

For example, a salesperson with declining sales. They will justify it by telling you that there is a recession, that a customer has been stolen by a multinational and thus now orders abroad and no longer locally, the company where they work has changed the line of products, etc., etc. But behind all these reasons (which, please note, may actually be true) there will ALWAYS also be another ingredient: they have committed a series of unethical or inefficient actions. Mind you, I'm not saying that they are a thief or have broken the law, or that they are dishonest. In most cases they're not. They have simply committed one or more non-optimal actions, violated a small agreement, compromised on the standards of service they usually provide, have some relational or financial irregularities. These ink droplets begin to pollute their communicating vessels, tangling up their life, altering their perception of the environment, causing some of their interpersonal relationships to cool (sometimes even important ones), and the consequence is that now they aren't very efficient. If they hadn't already performed

previous unethical or inefficient actions, perhaps the fact that one of their clients had been stolen by a corporation would not have affected their turnover so much, because they would have had enough energy to acquire other customers. But unethical actions steal away this energy, preventing us from being efficient.

An entrepreneur has had declining profits for the past two years. They explain it away by insisting that their industry has changed, that strong competitors have invaded their target pool of clients... All true things. But remember that behind these things, while true, there is always another ingredient that makes these external factors so deadly and impossible to overcome: some unethical or inefficient action has undermined their efficiency in their personal and professional life and until they regain their sense of ethics, many of the actions they attempt to remedy the situation will provide poor results.

There is something you're not confronting

Sometimes the inefficient or unethical action is something we should be handling but aren't. For example, if we have an employee or a partner who is doing very poorly, but instead of intervening we simply avoid the situation because we prefer to stay in our comfort zone.

Or there is crucial situation we know we should handle in our company, but we don't do anything because we're afraid of the reactions of the other people involved.

The above (in)actions are inefficient and will cause a drop in our productivity and revenues.

It is absolutely not my intention to generalize this theory or push it to extremes. I'm only trying to explain a concept that underlies success and excellence: it is almost impossible to achieve success or maintain a high level of performance when our sense of ethics begins to deteriorate.

Respecting your principles, respecting your explicit and implicit agreements, maintaining a high sense of ethics and ensuring that people around us do the same, this is the true KEY to success.

In the absence of ethics, everything else is useless.

### **VALUES, THE GREAT ENGINE OF EVERY INDIVIDUAL**

*"The question is, when so many others cut corners, shave the truth, self-deal, believe in the fast buck, and follow the crowd along the low road of least resistance, can we even afford to travel the high road of ethical behavior? Frankly, we can't afford anything else. Any other competitive angle is a pure crapshoot in today's business world. Companies with shaky ethics and shabby standards will be crippled as they try to compete in our changing world."*

*Price Pritchett*

Each of us, in the light of the consequences that unethical actions have on individual productivity, have had the chance to identify some shortcomings and less than ethical behavior that we've been involved in. Some readers might think: I realize that I have several drops of ink in my communicating vessels. What can I do to empty them? How can I eliminate all the excuses I've inserted in my operating system which are today preventing me from being truly effective or from properly perceiving my environment?

Paradoxically, all these things disappear once you assume responsibility for what you've done. You are the one who keeps justifying your actions, you are the one who, in an attempt to avoid guilt or discomfort over having committed something suboptimal, puts so much effort in to maintaining an altered vision of the environment. It is time to regain your effectiveness, to regain your true potential by exercising your ethics of excellence muscle once again.

Stop making excuses, stop blaming other people, stop manipulating the truth, stop finding fault in others so you can justify your own suboptimal behavior.

Accept your role as leader, your role as someone who initiates change. Make yourself a promoter of ethical values. Not as an inquisitor, but as someone who teaches by example, who lives their life with great self-esteem, because they know that they're not betraying the values that characterize them as human beings.

The individual who chooses ethical behavior, who maintains their personal integrity, who strives to live in the name of truth, these are the people who win the race in the long term.