

Are your partners ‘ego depleted’?

Dr Bob Murray considers why some senior lawyers wear ‘asshole cloaks’ to treat their co-workers badly and how such behaviour can be prevented



Dr Bob Murray is co-founder of Fortinberry Murray
fortinberrymurray.com

Not long ago I was talking to the head of a business service unit of a large multinational law firm. He was venting his frustration, as well as considerable anger, against a number of partners in the London office of his firm. They had been treating his people with considerable rudeness, and indeed their behaviour at times was nothing less than bullying.

The partners were treated by the firm as ‘untouchables’ because they were good rainmakers bringing in large sums of money. Younger partners, senior associates, and even solicitors were seeing these people as role models to be emulated and they continuously excused the bad behaviour.

A while ago a senior US partner, sadly now deceased, told me that successful partners tended to put on what he called their ‘asshole cloak’. They seemed to feel that they had the right to treat their

fellow workers badly as long as they treated their clients well.

I was thinking of these two conversations when I read a number of recent studies into what is called ‘ego depletion’ – the idea that we only have a limited ability to exercise self-control. In Donald Trump’s case, for example, this may be very little indeed.

In neurochemical terms, ego depletion is related closely to the rise and fall of the level of glutamate in the brain. Its action can be seen at work in the famous studies done of judges who let more people out on parole just after they’d eaten (SJ160/39). Food ingestion increases the flow of neural glutamate, so when their glutamate levels decreased, they applied less thought to the individual issues and fell back to the default – don’t let the person out. They became less altruistic and less ethical in the way they went about their work.

The idea of ego depletion is not new – it’s been around for over a decade – but what is new is the research that has shown its effect on moral and ethical behaviour. This applies particularly to leaders of firms or teams. The latest study, ‘When ethical leader behavior breaks bad: How ethical behavior can turn abusive via ego depletion and moral licensing’ (*Journal of Applied Psychology*, June 2016), found that if leaders displayed ethical behaviour to their teams during the day, they were more likely to display the opposite

later. A partner showing benevolent concern and altruism towards a number of clients over the course of the day may become a bully to their team or family later.

This latter behaviour is due to the offender having a sense of what’s called ‘moral licence’. Moral licensing is a phenomenon in which people, after doing something good, feel they have earned the right to act in a negative manner. Again it’s because of the depletive action of diminishing glutamate.



Ethical behaviour leads to mental fatigue and moral licensing

According to the researchers, it’s not easy to be ethical: ‘Being ethical means leaders often have to suppress their own self-interest (they must do “what’s right” as opposed to “what’s profitable”), and they have to monitor not only the performance outcomes of subordinates but also the means (to ensure that ethical/appropriate practices were followed).’

Simply put, ethical behaviour leads to mental fatigue and moral licensing, and this leads to leaders being more abusive

to their workers. The abuse the researchers found included ridiculing, insulting, and expressing anger toward employees, giving them the silent treatment, and reminding them of past mistakes or failures.

If the firm seems content to overlook bad behaviour, there are still some things that the colleagues and team members of the ego-depleted partner can do. The first is to praise them when they are being ethical. Praise causes a key part of the brain, the nucleus accumbens, to produce the neurochemical dopamine. Dopamine is the most powerful of the elements in the reward system, the others being the bonding neurochemical oxytocin and glutamate. It can act as a substitute for the latter and counter the effect of ego depletion. So rather than just letting the villainous partner get away with bad behaviour, be sneaky, be clever, and use praise when they are doing the right thing. They will soon do more of it to get the reward.

The other thing you can do is to make sure that the partner in question takes breaks and has a snack while they do. Of course you can praise them for taking a break – that’s high-level persuasion.

The same tactics can be used on your life partner when they come home from work, having been a good employee all day, and break bad. Get them to snack and to rest, and give praise when they do. You can’t lose. [SJ](#)