

## **Learned Helplessness**

*Contributed by John F. Macek LCSW*

HR Managers are frequently approached by supervisors frustrated over passive employees who act fearfully and are resistive to trying anything new. These people are not shy, a genetic trait that can be identified in infants as young as six weeks of age. They are exhibiting “learned helplessness,” a self view of being a loser, unable to win for losing.

The most powerful influence in shaping people’s attitude about themselves and the world around them comes from their experience with caretakers and family of origin. A second powerful influence is supervisors who foster helplessness and hopelessness among their staff. In order to be of help, HR professionals must understand the origins of staff behavior.

### Family of Origin Variables

Parents shape the self-view of their progeny in fairly happenstance ways. It goes something like this:

1. All groups have a pecking order and non-conflicting roles that give its members a role through which they can find acceptance. Within families, sibling rivalry is a given. This rivalry is often resolved by each child’s adopting a noncompeting role. One child might be the scholar, another might become the artist, another the comedian and so forth. By working within these prescribed roles, children gain recognition. It’s normally a healthy process, but sometimes children fall into “winner” or “loser” categories. The winner is the family’s success story. The “loser” gets attention only by being needy, even though the “helpless” child has native skills little different from his/her siblings.
2. Therapists most often see learned helplessness when a spouse, who sees the positives, is fed up with family attributions. Usually it’s a result of parents creating a winner and loser as a way of resolving conflictual feelings they have about themselves. By treating one child as faultless and successful, they can feel successful. By treating another child as a loser, they have a scapegoat for qualities they do not like about themselves.
3. The child assigned to the winner role fulfills parental dreams of success. The child assigned the loser role carries their undesirable traits. Ultimately, both children lose. In the workplace “winners” show a compulsion to be perfect. They are quick to declare themselves failures when making even minor mistakes. In the workplace the scapegoat child will perform very well until raised to “success” levels in which they feel they do not belong. Learned helplessness leads individuals to avoid success because they feel out of place and subject to reprimand for stepping out of place. Fortunately, a skilled therapist can readily help such individuals become comfortable with the reality of their skills and help them discard the loser identity.
4. Sometimes a learned helplessness view is adopted by entire families, especially the socially ostracized and economically disadvantaged. Because of color, national origin or other typical bases of discrimination, these individuals feel safer staying in their place. Many highly skilled minority individuals struggle with this when companies recognize their skill and promote them. Fortunately, continuous reassurance, or brief intervention with a therapist, can help discover and adopt a success identity.

### Supervisor Initiated Learned Helplessness

Managers usually view HR professionals as responsible for siding with them in dealing with problem employees. However, if a supervisor is orchestrating a helplessness response, HR

professionals are put into a dicey situation. What can the HR professional do? The first step is to identify the most likely origin of the problem. In the majority of situations the employee has learned this self-view from other sources. This condition calls for EAP assistance. If it becomes evident that multiple personnel reporting to this manager are showing similar traits, then there's strong room for suspicion that the supervisor is causal. (It's rarely an either/or situation; usually a both/and).

Managers can foster learned helplessness in two ways:

1. It's a given that managers want their personnel to succeed. The rub comes with defining what "success" means. Some managers want creativity and risk taking. Others view unquestioning obedience as success. Other managers view as successful those personnel who best meet their ego needs. (Of course, true success lies in doing excellent work.)
2. Micromanagement is the most common source of learned helplessness. Micromanagers urge their personnel to take initiative, but not too much. They expect their staff to clear every decision with them. That's a double bind. Desperate to enhance their resume, micromanagers often use their personnel as sources of ideas for which the manager then takes credit. Sometimes the manager does not have a clue about what to do, so they tell a staff member: "Figure something out, and I'll tell you if you're wrong." It's no wonder that their staff put much time and effort into staying off the radar screen.

#### Guidance for HR Professionals

As noted earlier, the HR professional's first task is to sort out the likely source of the problem.

If the HR professional sees that the problem originates with the employee, they can follow one of two courses:

1. Refer the employee to EAP (as noted above) where a mental health professional can help the employee reassess their self view.
2. Teach managers simple behavioral shaping techniques some of which are very well described in Kenneth Blanchard and Spencer Johnson's classic The One Minute Manager. When the employee makes any move in the right direction, offer recognition and praise. Slowly raise the bar as the employee gains confidence and help them recognize their true value and skills. Using this technique requires a manager with good social skills. Don't use this option if the manager's primary style is command and control. Their perspective is to find fault to correct. Offering praise is not in their vocabulary.

When it's the manager who is originating the problem, here are some options the HR professional can consider:

1. Offer praise by recognizing the manager's sincerity in improving the situation.
2. Applaud the manager's initiative in seeking remedy.
3. Listen, listen, listen. Listening validates. Be careful to reward only good intent and carefully avoid validating the manager's destructive behavior.
4. As trust develops, talk to the manager about technique. Keep it simple, like "what do you do when you observe what?"
5. Try to shape the manager's behavior by encouraging him/her to "catch the employee doing something right" (Spencer & Johnson). Urge the manager to be open and honest with the

employee. Hints won't do, nor will blanket criticism. To achieve behavioral change, expectations must be very clear.

6. Give the manager a copy of One Minute Manager or similar work and discuss the content with them. That takes the heat off you and puts it in the hands of an external expert.

If all else fails, bring in a qualified consultant. An external consultant has latitude you do not have. Taking this action also documents your due diligence at achieving positive resolution should a wrongful discharge claim be filed.

It is always more cost effective to remedy problem situations than to terminate, recruit, train, only to see the same problem reoccur.

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