

The Invisible Disability

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Recent brain research¹ describes how in infancy and childhood our brains form "defensive" circuits that trigger actions designed to comfort ourselves in the event of persistent neglect or mistreatment. These reactions are formed out of conscious awareness. As adults when we are disrespected in any way, our hard-wired impulses are triggered. Without awareness we slip into a defensive action. Fortunately, as balanced adults our thinking brain gets consulted before we take drastic action. Thus we may get a bad feeling when the boss orders us around, but we are able to repress the urge to bat him (or her). But even though we repress that urge, we do take defensive action.

This may take the form of a seemingly acceptable maneuver, like finding fault with his next idea, or later disagreeing with a suggestion he makes. The point is, that no action that is perceived as disrespectful—that suggests, even slightly, that we are meaningless or unimportant—passes without a negative response. This usually happens without our being aware that we are “getting even”.

This interesting conclusion arises out of research done some years ago. In the 1970's and 80's a small company in Cambridge, Massachusetts was studying the creative process². Their research tool was closed circuit television. They videotaped small groups of people attempting to solve problems and invent new products together. Using the tapes, they could trace the consequences of the various behaviors of group members. One of the more remarkable discoveries was that when one member said or did something that demeaned another, the 'injured' party unfailingly got revenge by direct action or more subtly by withdrawing or distracting others. When this was pointed out in reviews of the tapes, both perpetrators and the targets were surprised. At first, the researchers suspected these reactions reflected immaturity. But after study of thousands of such interactions, there were almost no exceptions. One of the more impressive findings was the extreme sensitivity of participants to discounting actions. A slight change in tone, a minor shift in posture, any indication of boredom or rejection, the revenge reaction was triggered, and we would later see 'get even' response.

The group named the phenomenon The Law of Discount Revenge.

Once aware of this “Law”, it is not difficult to observe instances to assure oneself it is a fact. What is not easy to observe are the many defensive maneuvers that pass as acceptable behavior even though many of them get in the way of collaboration and accomplishment. We have provided a list of behaviors that seem to define positive and negative behaviors.³

Because many of these negative behaviors are triggered out of awareness, they represent an invisible disability—an element of diminished cooperation and productivity that is uncalculated.

What is significant for our present purpose is the fact that these invisible destroyers of collaboration and performance can have profound consequences without raising red flags and inviting reform.

With this “Law” in mind we can look at the notion of collaboration and productivity in the workplace with different eyes. In a company where management rules with a heavy hand, we would expect less wholehearted effort than in a company where people are managed with great respect. Because actions and reactions are out of awareness, this is not easy to observe, but in some situations its effects can be “seen”.

Some case histories