

Good Intentions Syndrome

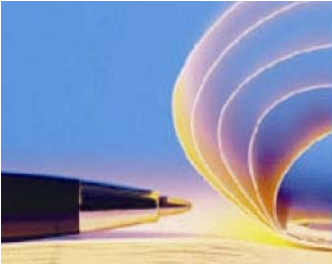
People tend to judge others by their behavior but judge themselves by their intentions. While this tendency may appear on the surface to be rather inconsequential, it is arguably one of the leading causes of relational discord. Although the fundamental attribution error is present in all human relationships, the purpose of this article is to provide a brief introduction to its implications for organizations and then to suggest a process by which organizations can begin to improve the quality of their business relationships. The good intentions (GI) syndrome, as it will be referred to in this paper, will be discussed from the perspective of both the organization (as the provider of products and services) and that of the potential customer. In addition, this paper will reflect on two different arenas that can give rise to the GI syndrome: 1) the failure of people to act on their intentions, and 2) the impact of unintended consequences. The paper concludes by recommending a decision-making framework to help organizations better understand and manage issues related to their own "good intentions" as well as to shed light on how they can benefit from helping their customer to avoid similar problems.

Abstract

Every person and every organization is to some extent a victim of their own "good intentions." It is ironic that the mere suggestion of good intentions seems to imply a negative outcome. The natural assumption seems to be that either the good intention never materialized or that action is taken but it results in an unintended consequence. Organizational examples abound as well. For example, an organization might like to invest in new technology to enhance their productivity but finds itself unable to execute their plans due to internal resistance to change. Another scenario, framed within the context of unintended consequences, might be where a well-intending decision-maker makes an initial purchase primarily on price, but in so doing fails to consider the higher operating costs or related quality implications and as a consequence ends up costing the organization more in the long run.

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Although some problems associated with the GI syndrome can occur at three distinct points, there are only two basic sources of GI error. The first type of error is related to the situation where an individual or organization fails, for whatever reason, to take action on their intentions. This type of error is perhaps the easiest to recognize and will be referred to as Type 1 GI error. The second general type of relational error is when a person or organization fails to adequately anticipate unintended outcomes. There are two potential forms of this kind of error: 1) when as a consequence of taking no action, an unintended outcome results (Type 2 GI error) or 2) when action is taken that results in an unexpected outcome (Type 3 GI error). Each of the two general



types of GI errors has its own unique set of contributing conditions and potential set of remedies that needs to be considered.

Failure to take action

Although a great deal of attention and resources are devoted to the measurement of attitudes, the empirical evidence suggests that attitudes are not necessarily a very good predictor of behavior. Behavior intentions are used to predict behavior by focusing attention on those factors that can prevent a person or organization from taking action. The most obvious managerial implication is that once an intention has been formed the organization must focus its attention on eliminating the barriers to the desired behavior. For example, a person may wish to register to take a non-credit course but is unaware of who is currently offering such classes.

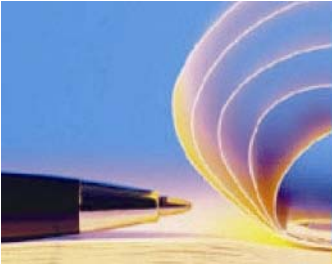
Ironically, if you were to fail to recognize this difference, you may unintentionally frustrate the “buyer” to such an extent that you actually drive them away when they otherwise really wanted to buy something from you. This would be a case of an unintended consequence resulting from someone not taking action.

Although both attitudes and subjective norms are important in the overall decision making process, for the purposes of this paper, the primary focus of attention is on identifying and eliminating the barriers between intentions and behavior, hence the failure to take action.

Law of Unintended Consequences

The law of unintended consequences has long been understood to illustrate that perverse and unanticipated consequences can result from well intending decisions. In 1936, an American sociologist by the name of R.K. Merton introduced one of the first systematic discussions on the subject of unintended consequences. He specifically suggested that there were five basic sources of unintended consequences (UC). The first two sources of error are attributed to ignorance and error. Although relative passive sources of UC, they often reflect poor planning or immature thinking. The third source of UC is what he termed “imperious immediacy of interest.” In this case we find that there are decisions that are made by someone who really doesn’t want to know that others’ UC’s may also occur. Many years later, Ken Goodpaster (1994) coined the term teleopathy to refer to irrational goal fixation in his analysis of business ethics. In our current use, irrational goal fixation is very similar to what Merton referred to as imperious interest. Although goals and objectives are very important, when they become unbalanced they can also create their own set of problems. Fortunately, Dr. Goodpaster suggested that it is possible to discern the presence of teleopathy when one or all of the following symptoms were present: 1) a reckless fixation on a goal, 2) tendency to rationalize available information and 3) detachment and separation from those presenting opposing information. Hence, an organization must be particularly alert for unintended consequences when one or more of these symptoms are present.

The fourth source of the UC is “basic values.” When two or more values are in conflict with each other there is a greater likelihood that UC’s will occur. For example, in the short term an organization can engage in behaviors that can make their customers satisfied but that will also in the long run do them harm and therefore make them unhappy. The classic educational example is for an instructor to be easy on their students (hence making them happy) yet in the long run do them harm (hence causing them to become dissatisfied in the long run) because the students are



not adequately prepared for the world. It can also be argued that any condition that gives rise to an ethical dilemma (classically defined as a conflict between two or more values) also increases the probability of an unintended outcome. As a consequence, organizations are well advised to be particularly alert whenever ethical dilemmas are present. Enron is just one of the notable examples.

The fifth and final source of UC's is what Merton called the "self-defeating prediction." By virtue of anticipating certain outcomes, you actually create or identify circumstances that lead others to take action that averts the prediction. A recent example can be found in England where experts were predicting that due to the concentration of businesses within the financial district of London, the traffic pattern would eventually result in a transportation gridlock. However, in February of 2003, the city of London introduced a traffic tax that had the dual impact of generating revenues for the city as well as reducing the level of traffic within the city. Merton later coined the term "self-fulfilling prophecy of Pygmalion effect" to address the converse of his self-defeating prediction.

The Good Intentions Syndrome

The GI syndrome has the potential to impact every individual or organization that is trying to establish or sustain a relationship. Building on well-established principles, the following maps a six-step approach that will enable either an organization or individual to systematically identify different types of GI error as well as provide a process for determining various approaches to treat the problem. The framework can be applied equally well to understanding organizational behavior as well as to understanding the impact of the problem from the perspective of the customer.

GI Assessment Protocol

Step 1: Problem Identification

Step 2: Gather Information

Step 3: Generate Alternatives

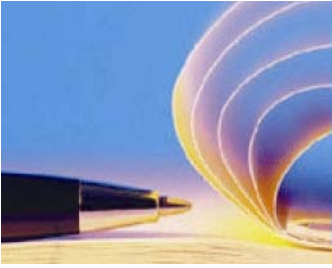
Step 4: Choice (intentions phase)

Step 5: Choice (enacted behavior)

Step 6: Performance Feedback

Step 1: Problem Identification

Although there can be any number of ways in which a person or organization can become aware that they have a GI problem, in most cases our awareness will neither be immediate nor intuitively obvious. For example, it is much easier to observe the presence of an activity than it is to observe someone's failure to take action. In the case of a Type 1 error, you have to infer inaction from its direct or indirect consequence. For example, you have no catalogues to mail out because someone forgot to submit the printing requisition. But as difficult as inaction is to observe, it is generally more difficult to discern the causes of unintended outcomes. In our culture, people tend to focus on treating symptoms as opposed to treating their root cause. The most difficult type of UC error to discern is a Type 2 error; where you have both the unintended consequence (immediate symptom) and where you must trace its origin back to a failure of someone to take an action. For example, you are losing market share to a competitor because



you failed to invest in a technology that is now giving your competitor a distinct advantage in the marketplace.

In almost all cases it is reasonable to assume that all three types of error exist in any given relationship. The prudent person, of course, allocates their time and resources to issues that are of greatest importance and to those that they expect the greatest return from the investment of their time. Given the elusive pervasiveness of the GI problem, organizations must ask themselves, how many relationships are now suffering due to their inattention to the type of error? To specifically address the GI problem, a person can conduct a comprehensive audit of all three types of GI error or they can decide to prioritize the types of error that they are interested in and then explore each one in greater detail. As a general rule, it is easier to identify issues related to someone's failure to take action than it is to anticipate unintended outcomes. Nevertheless, depending upon the developmental characteristics of the organization or individual, or given the nature of a particular problem, a person can elect to address anyone of the three types of GI error.

Step 2: Gather Information

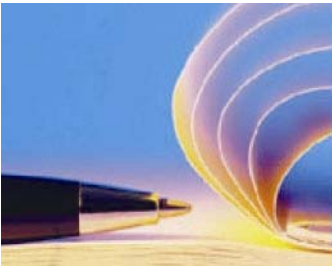
There are a variety of different procedures that can be used to gather information about GI errors. For example, a common yet very powerful approach is to use a brainstorming technique known as the focus group. If a brainstorming technique is used it is often useful to incorporate a variety of perspectives including but not necessarily limited to the relevant stakeholder group of the organization.

Consider the following question: what might be preventing a people right now from acting on their interest in taking a course though your community program? For example, you may conduct research and discover a situation like the following: an individual is watching a television special that is featuring mountain climbing.

As a consequence, they become interested in learning what classes might be offered on mountain climbing in their local area. It is 10:30 in the evening on a Saturday, where do they go for that information? The basic problem is that the consumer does not know how or where to obtain information about mountain climbing classes. If they cannot access the information immediately, perhaps even spontaneously register for the class, by Sunday or Monday the interest may have faded into the background for be forgotten altogether having been displaced by the next most immediate source of distraction.

Step 3: Generate Alternatives

Using the examples cited above, your management team can now begin to generate various alternatives to address the identified problem. One answer may be to provide information online that enables the prospective student to register and pay for their course while their interest is top-of-mind. Another solution might be to create a one-stop shop so that any time a person has a question about classes in your area they can call (or go online) and they will be referred to someone that is offering the class of interest. The latter approach is not unlike the classic strategy developed by the yellow pages. Another classic marketing approach is to advertise in editorial appropriate media. In the case of our example, mountain climbing classes would be advertised in appropriate magazines or on shows that feature mountain climbing. The latter approach, while



good for large business selling a national product, may prove to be too costly for many small to mid-sized organizations.

Step 4: Choice (intentions phase)

Again, using the cited example, your management team decides that the best approach is to migrate to an online registration system. But just like the student that didn't know where to go for information, your efforts to address the concern may also become frustrated. For example, your organization may be paralyzed by uncertainty of how to evaluate potential vendors of online services, it may be risk averse or reluctant to engage in systemic change or perhaps your organization suffers from a flawed or ineffective planning process. At this stage your organization needs to cycle through steps two and three above focusing on the new problem that has just presented itself.

From the customer's perspective, even if they are aware that your community program may offer a mountain climbing class, they may not have the immediate cash to pay for the program. Hence payment becomes a barrier to registration. The solution, of course, may be to offer a credit card payment option at the time of registration. Pizza delivery firms have recently adopted this practice when they recognized that form of payment was a barrier to many people that wanted to order a pizza.

Step 5: Choice (behavior)

Having eliminated the barriers to implementing an online registration system your organization is ready to capitalize on opportunities that are already presenting themselves in the marketplace. If you prefer, you may wish to think of this action in terms of becoming more productive or simply of providing a higher quality service to your community of interest.

Step 6: Performance Feedback

Finally, it is very important that your organization collect information regarding how well they addressed the identified opportunity. The feedback can and should deal both with the process of identifying, classifying and choosing opportunities as well as how well you were able to develop and take advantage of the opportunity that you identified. There are, of course, a number of performance feedback systems that can be utilized. I tend to favor using a simple post-mortem technique. Experts also recommend that organizations set specific objectives against which they will evaluate their performance based on the mission of their institution.

Objectives so specified should also meet the following criteria: 1) the objective should be measurable 2) the objective should be realistic and address factors over which members in the organization have control, and 3) cover a specific time period. For example, this next year we will conduct a basic GI audit, select one error that we identify, set a time frame for addressing the problem and implement a plan to take advantage of the opportunity.