Get the Outcomes You Want

A Coaching Framework for Leaders
to Avoid Unintended Consequences

by Jay Cone

Do you often get outcomes that are exactly the opposite of what you want — or what the organization needs? It's a frustrating situation to be in – with your boss, colleagues, team members, and just about anyone else on the job. But there are steps you can take to get more of what you want. This piece explores them in detail and introduces a useful tool for avoiding ironic outcomes.

TYPICAL SCENARIOS

A year or so ago I had a coaching conversation with a Human Resources Manager for a retail company. The manager confided in me that conflict made her uncomfortable. She described the lengths to which she would go to avoid raising challenging issues or delivering candid feedback. At one point in the conversation, she described a damaged relationship with a colleague who thought she was trying to sabotage his career. "He accused me of going behind his back to the Regional Director about complaints I had received from his direct reports," she said. As we talked, it became clear to both of us that her choice to avoid delivering direct feedback to her colleague had festered into a judgment about her motives. To put it another way: By going out of her way to avoid conflict, she had created conflict. She inadvertently got the outcome she was trying to avoid.

Consider other familiar situations:

- The person who wants to have close relationships with everyone ends up isolated because others judge his behavior as "needy" and overly personal.
- The person who wants to avoid surprises and produce high-quality work ends up surprised by missed deadlines and avoidable errors — because his micromanaged employees are afraid to take initiative and use their own judgment.
- The well-meaning person who wants to empower her colleagues and direct reports through delegation ends up undermining everyone's self-confidence when she is forced to rescue the project at the last-minute — having steadfastly avoided giving any guidance along the way.
- A co-worker who wants to influence the thinking of others by considering all sides of an issue ends up being excluded from teams and meetings because he's viewed as a high-maintenance contrarian who slows things down with useless observations and confrontational questions.

The above examples, and countless others, share two interesting features. First, they describe an outcome that is the direct opposite of the intended one. Secondly, the outcomes result from an overuse of what starts off as an appropriate set of behaviors given the person's intentions.

For example, if you want close relationships, it's a good idea to spend time with people and be open about yourself; or if you want to ensure high quality work it makes sense to do a lot of checking. The problems seem to arise when the otherwise appropriate set of behaviors get overused. It's like pressing on the accelerator of a car. Not enough pressure and you go nowhere. Apply an appropriate amount of pressure, and you make progress while staying in the flow of traffic. Keep your foot on the accelerator, and you make a mess of the traffic flow, irritate the other drivers, and red-line the engine.

The behaviors described above go beyond simply being ineffective or even counterproductive. Let's call a situation where the result produced is the exact opposite of the result desired an "ironic outcome." If we could notice with objective clarity when the return for our effort starts to diminish, we might be able to make a different choice before our counterproductive efforts produce ironic outcomes.

My colleague Nancy Brodsky developed a straightforward thought framework that connects our belief systems with the outcomes we produce. According the framework, called "Levels of Reflection," our underlying beliefs influence the way we think and feel about a particular situation; our thoughts and feelings in turn influence the behaviors we adopt; and finally, our behaviors produce consequences, sometimes intended, sometimes unintended (see illustration).

The feedback loops in the framework represent the opportunity to reflect on the results we're achieving. We may choose to evaluate our behaviors (a first tier reflection) in light of the outcomes, or we may look at our thoughts and feelings (a second tier reflection), or we may become more conscious of our underlying beliefs (a third tier reflection). We can be sure of one thing: if we change nothing about our beliefs, thoughts, feelings or behaviors we should expect that the results we're getting won't change either.

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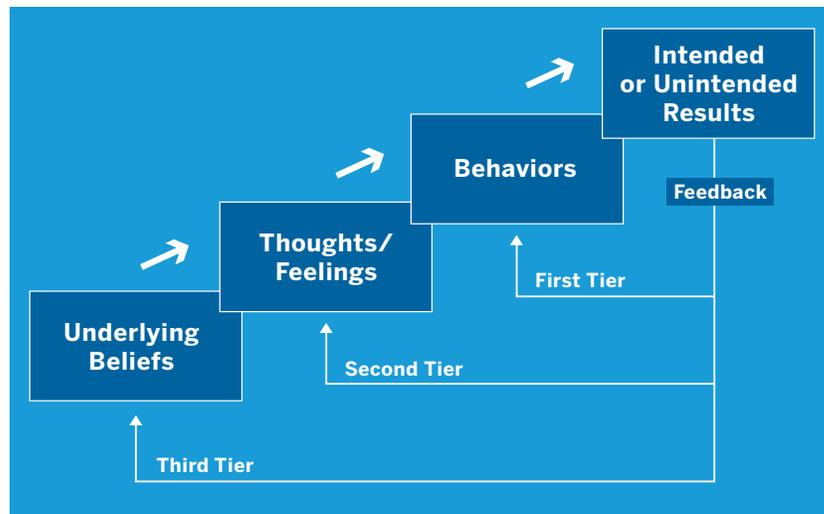
The Levels of Reflection framework becomes useful as a map of the cause and effect relationships because it's a concrete way of illustrating that if you want a different outcome, you'll need to change your behavior; and if you want to change your behavior you'll have to decide whether you're willing to reconsider your thoughts, feelings and/or beliefs.

Of course, it's possible and often advisable to adopt behaviors that are not aligned with your thinking and beliefs. For example, you may choose to attend the dinner with your colleagues at the end of a long day of meetings even though you feel exhausted, think that it's a waste of time and hold a belief that people shouldn't be pressured to participate in social events with co-workers. Over time, however, repeatedly being forced to adopt a behavior misaligned with our thoughts, feelings and/or beliefs escalates from tiresome to debilitating — often without warning.

Using the case of the Human Resources Manager above, let's see how the "Levels of Reflection" model explains the connections between what she believes, how she thinks, and what she ultimately decided to do. Working the framework backwards, we start with the outcomes:

Unintended Consequences:
- Damaged relationship,
- Broken trust,
- Conflict.

Behaviors:
- Avoided giving feedback.
- Didn't share the data in person.
- Wrote up a report with feedback.
- Sent the report to the Regional Director as part of the Performance Management Process.

Thoughts and Feelings:
- I'm afraid he'll be angry at me when he hears the feedback.
- He'll want to know the source and when I refuse to tell him, it will strain our relationship
- He might even go on a witch hunt that lowers morale.
- He won't change, anyway.
- I won't be able to deliver the message in a straightforward way, so he'll lose respect for me as a manager.
- He'll discount the data or force me to defend it… or worse, he'll ask me if I think the feedback is accurate.

Underlying Beliefs:
- When managers get to a certain level they get stuck in their ways and can't really change their habits.
- Managers at a certain level ignore what people think of them and just get the work done.
- People will avoid working with me if I deliver upsetting news.
- Workplace professionals need to respect each other and that means getting along with each other.
- The best managers don't let their emotions influence their interactions, so it's best to avoid volatile situations and keep emotions in check.

The HR manager's outcome — greater conflict — is "ironic" because it contradicts her underlying beliefs. The HR manager wants to appear professional, get along with others in the work place, and remain in control of her emotions, but her behavior has escalated the tension rather than reduced it. She's not getting along with her colleague, the relationship is now characterized by a lack of respect, and her professionalism is being questioned.

Thinking in terms of cause and effect, the link between behavior and consequence makes sense; if you withhold important information from someone, you risk damaging the relationship and undermining trust. The connection between the Thoughts / Feelings and the Behaviors seems reasonable; after all, if I was afraid of someone's reaction and didn't think it would amount to any real change in the long run, I'd be reluctant to share the data, too. Finally, it's understandable that someone who believes that professionalism is primarily about getting along with others and holding emotions in check would experience anxiety about delivering bad news and design a strategy to avoid a potentially emotional confrontation.

Let's use the framework to look at three levels of change when we're not happy with the outcomes we're getting.

FIRST TIER CHANGE: BEHAVIOR

When the consequences of our actions are unintended and unwanted, we can sometimes make a quick adjustment to our behavior to fix the problem. For example, a colleague gives me feedback: I haven't requested input from one of my team members who seems reluctant to speak up in meetings. I start calling on the team member and I notice greater engagement and better quality discussions.

SECOND TIER CHANGE: THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS

When the consequences of our actions turn counterproductive — in other words, we're actually making things worse — we may need to look beyond our behaviors to our thoughts and feelings. For example, it's uncomfortable for me to openly challenge my boss, but I've noticed that the boss actually seems to enjoy the give and take of verbal sparring matches and tends to favor advice from colleagues who openly disagree with him in meetings. Opting for a behavior driven by my anxiety over experiencing the

discomfort of flexing my style has reduced my effectiveness as a team member. I work on becoming comfortable with a more provocative style by finding non -threatening venues to try out the new behavior. Over time, I reduce my anxiety about speaking my mind candidly at team meetings.

THIRD TIER CHANGE: BELIEFS

When the outcomes turn ironic and what we're getting regularly betrays our intentions, it's a clue that a pattern of behavior has taken charge. It's akin to a malfunctioning cruise control on a car that accelerates imperceptibly until we suddenly notice that we're speeding. One telltale sign that we're dealing with ironic outcomes is the way we justify our behavior. Instead of offering some version of "I don't know. It seemed like a good idea at the time," you might hear us offer a more rehearsed and philosophical justification: "I just think it's wrong to…" or "People just don't understand that…" etc. Each of us, I suspect, has experienced the frustration of getting the opposite of what we want while offering a kind of righteous defense of the behaviors we've chosen. When we invoke generalized value judgments to explain ourselves, we're bumping up against situations where our underlying beliefs contrast with the protocols of our roles; such are the situations that cause leaders to derail, college students to drop out, and couples to divorce. Not all ironic outcomes are catastrophic, but there is a long-term cost to repeatedly producing the opposite of what you want.

HOW TO STOP PRODUCING THE WRONG OUTCOMES

Three simple steps – in the form of questions to answer - can help you rewire a pattern of behavior that produces ironic outcomes. A word of caution: the steps are few, but the elevation is great. You'll either need the capacity to be brutally honest with yourself . . . or be fortunate enough to have someone in your life who can be honest with you without having an axe to grind.

1) **Take your foot off the accelerator.**
   Where are you exerting effort that is out of proportion with the situation? In the case of our HR Manager, it took effort for her to mislead her colleague: "The meetings went well," she reported after one-on-ones with her colleague's team. "Everyone seems pleased with your leadership." She avoided meeting with her colleague, often taking several extra steps to get information indirectly rather than simply going to the source.

2) **Examine the belief system you're using to justify the behavior.**
   What beliefs do you use to justify your choices? When pressed, the HR Manager admitted that she often avoids a confrontation because she believes that leaders prefer to work with people who are supportive and positive. Notice that the interest served by this belief is to work more closely with leaders; to be involved and included when leaders build strategies and make decisions.

3) Thank the belief system for services rendered, and adapt.

You've held onto the belief systems that drive your behaviors for good reason: until recently, they've served you well. Something valuable gets lost whenever we change our beliefs, and it's the aversion to loss that makes change hard. The value that the HR Manager places on being supportive and positive has helped her become a trusted thought partner and popular boss. Now, the question becomes: In what ways does the value she places on being supportive and positive undermine her chances to be at the table when the big decisions are being made?

The point here is not to let go of the belief, but to either demote it or re-conceptualize it. The HR Manager's current and future roles will occasionally put her in situations where "supportive" and "positive" are trumped by "candid" and "direct." She can either recognize that the belief does not apply to all situations or she can redefine "supportive" to include candor and directness.

A FINAL THOUGHT

When we notice that we're getting the opposite of what we want, altering our behaviors or getting comfortable with new ways of thinking and feeling won't interrupt long-standing patterns of behavior. If we're profoundly dissatisfied with the results we're getting — and we make the choice to look at our own contributions to the situation rather than blame others — we'll eventually be forced to take a fresh look at our beliefs. Outcomes turn ironic when we wrap ourselves in a belief that served us in simpler times like a beloved, threadbare sweater that doesn't quite fit, and we insist that it still suits us. It's a new decade. Which of your beliefs will you tailor, and which will you move to the back of your closet, or pack up and donate?

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