Stamping Out Selfishness

Imagine yourself sitting behind the driving wheel of your car. You waited patiently in the long queue of cars on Uhuru Highway waiting to turn up Valley Road at the Kenyatta Avenue roundabout in Nairobi. Then when traffic starts to move, you find multiple other drivers who did not wait and drive up quickly in other lanes selfishly pushing into your lane, thus making the law abiding citizen even more disadvantaged by waiting even longer all for merely following the rules.

Now switch gears and focus on your office setting. All of us can picture at least one person in our workplaces who always seems selfish in every endeavor. Every decision and action that the individual takes seems purely to gain for their own short-term or long-term selfish interest. The fact that as a result of their selfish behavior, coworkers no longer trust them, seems not to bother them in the least. How does someone’s selfishness impact the rest of an office or the rest of society at large? Life and job satisfaction drops precipitously.

Social scientists and philosophers stress the importance of altruism. Altruism stands in stark contrast as the opposite of selfishness whereby we help our fellow humanity without any expectation of personal gain. So ask yourself, is there ever a truly selfless deed? Do people ever help others purely for the sake of helping and never for their good? The 1990s sitcom Friends highlighted the issue with characters Joey and Phoebe debating and searching for ways to help others and not feel a sense of good and fulfillment in the process.

Would you donate a kidney to a non-relative if you would become sicker as a result and no one else would ever find out about your good deed? How about would you stop and assist a car accident victim on the side of the road and take them to the hospital even though the police may incorrectly accuse you of culpability in the accident if you help? Would you assist a neighbor at night as they scream if thieves break into their home and risk your own life for your neighbor’s benefit? Now, instead, would you be more likely to help if there existed laws requiring you to act in such situations? Encouraging altruism proves difficult for governments as well as companies.

In an organizational setting, altruism becomes hard to evolve because of cheaters. Whether cheating while driving, doing business transactions, false reporting in a workplace, or lying to the Kenya Revenue Authority about one’s taxes, cheaters exist in society. Punishment stands as a logical deterrent to cheating behavior. Even the animal kingdom in social mammals, like dear, punish other harem members who try to escape or social insects in colonies punish members who attempt to reproduce instead of the queen.
Japanese researchers Mayuko Nakamarua and Yoh Iwasa detail how altruistic individuals will not indefinitely police and punish cheaters unless they also gain from doing the punishment. Drivers who refuse a cheater to enter a line of cars, as an example, gain because their own commute time shortens nominally.

What should managers do to stop cheaters and promote altruism? Punishment works well to deter cheaters, but proves tiresome and requires a lot of managerial effort. You can read about the difficulty and techniques in management searching out and punishing cheaters by reading “altruistic punishment” in organizational behavior literature. Managers can foster behaviors that deter cheating, but at the expense of the punisher.

Researcher Omar Eldakar and his team in the United States developed a method for executives to curb cheaters and promote altruism backed by mathematical regressions on the probabilities of behavior. The researchers determined that cheaters can police and punish other cheaters. Such behavior actually reduces the chances of cheating and selfishness from forming in an organization.

So, an organization could provide incentives for employees to report cheaters. Cheaters often find other cheaters more easily than compliant altruistic staff. The cheaters’ own selfishness will search for the monetary or recognition reward and look to turn in other equally guilty staff. In so doing, cheaters become aware of the multiple sets of eyes watching them. As a similar example, how many of us drove better on Kenyan roads when Citizen TV used to run their Road Hogs section in the nightly news for fear of being shown on television? Now imagine that Citizen TV would have distributed rewards to those reporting such selfish behaviors. Many more reports and self-modifying behavior would occur.

Hassan Benchekroun and Ngo Van Long in Canada detail how state actors may influence anti-selfish behavior even when a cheater feels no guilt, but the effect is less than intra-organizational punishers. So citizens need to stand up and police each other in order to foster altruism and reduce selfish behavior. We cannot expect the government at the macro level or company executives at a micro level to do all the work that we too should undertake.

In summary, stand up and socially punish selfishness and cheaters. Let us build better environments at home, at work, and everywhere in between. Share your stories of selfish citizens or coworkers with other Business Talk readers through #KenyaCheaters on Twitter.

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