

Chapter 4

Transference

This chapter was initially written as a chapter of this book. It was then rewritten for publication in a professional journal. In its current form, this chapter is an expanded version of the article titled, Detecting And Responding Constructively To Transference In The Workplace, which was published in *The Journal of Organization and Management* in January, 2014. The formal tone and structure of this chapter, as well as the next chapter on Managing Conflict, are a derivative of the requirements of academic journals. However, these chapters were written for managers of operating businesses. Although they do discuss theory, they are designed to be practical and helpful, not theoretical.

ABSTRACT

Both managers and the staff they supervise bring unconscious and unresolved personal issues into their relationships in the workplace. This phenomenon is called “transference.” Transference generally interferes with the positive working relationships that are essential to achieving organizational objectives. This article provides a conceptual framework for differentiating transference from other complex emotional interactions that can occur in the workplace as well as a set of clear action steps for how the manager can respond to transference constructively. Examples of both staff and manager transference are presented to illustrate how managers can detect and then respond effectively to transference. It is noted that managers are not psychotherapists; knowledge about transference should therefore be used with caution. It is a manager’s job is to help staff to succeed with their work, not to help them resolve personal problems.

Managers and the staff who work for them experience a complex array of emotions in the workplace. A manager will have interactions with staff that sometimes generate emotions that are disturbing. One particular type of interaction, termed “transference,” can be particularly troubling because it catches managers by surprise, often generating thoughts, feelings, fantasies, and behavior that are experienced as out of control and irrational. This can present a serious challenge to managers’ ability to do their jobs.

The term “transference” (Freud & Breuer, 1895) derives from Freud’s observations about the surprising ways his patients related to him during psychotherapy and the equally surprising ways he found himself relating to them¹. He discovered that he and his

¹ For those familiar with the psychoanalytic literature it will be noted that the term “manager transference” is being used instead of “counter-transference.” Trying to explain that counter-transference doesn’t really mean what the term implies (i.e., a reaction to transference) would be a great distraction to the reader.

patients unknowingly brought their unresolved emotional conflicts into the therapeutic relationship. The process was unconscious for both parties. Freud believed he helped his patients by bringing their unconscious conflicts out into the open where they could be examined and resolved. In the context of a therapeutic process, understanding transference could be very helpful. By examining his reactions to his patients, Freud, for the most part, was able to keep himself from acting out his own problems with his patients. He also found that his observation of the emotional issues his patients evoked in him provided him with very useful information. It helped him to better understand his patients' inner psychic worlds.

Transference does not just occur in the context of psychotherapy. It can occur in a marriage, in a friendship, or in the relationship between a manager and supervisee. Most often, it undermines these relationships.

Transference is a concept that refers to our natural tendency to respond to certain situations in unique, predetermined ways--predetermined by much earlier, formative experiences usually within the context of the primary attachment relationship. These patterns, deeply ingrained, arise sometimes unexpectedly and unhelpfully--in psychoanalysis, we would say that old reactions constitute the core of a person's problem, and that he or she needs to understand them well in order to be able to make more useful choices. Transference is what is transferred to new situations from previous situations. As a result, a person's relationship to lovers and friends, as well as any other relationship, including his psychoanalyst, includes elements from his or her earliest relationships. (The American Psychoanalytic Association, 2011.)

For managers to help their staff and improve performance, it will be helpful for them to understand how transference-based interactions work and how to differentiate them from other interactions that may be intense and troubling. It will also be helpful for managers to know how to handle transference when it is a significant factor in their working relationships with staff.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There is a growing body of research available that can help managers to better understand the complexity of the emotional environment in which they work. It is becoming ever clearer that the organizations we work for are not "cool arenas for dispassionate thought and action" (Ashkansay, Hartel, & Zerbe, 2000). The workplace is a highly complex interpersonal environment where emotions play a major role in communication, bonding, motivation, and perception. Strong emotions in the

workplace are common and not necessarily destructive; they are most often the reflection of people being committed to their work and passionate about it (Ambler, 2006; Yihan, 2008-2010).

The concept of transference does not fit neatly into the major theoretical constructs that have been developed to describe emotions and behavior in the workplace. It is best described as a “middle-range theory,” one that attempts to explain only a part of a puzzle where all the pieces are yet to be connected (Pinder & Moore, 1979, 1980). Very little has been written specifically about transference in the workplace. The psychoanalytic literature has explored the application of transference theory to organizational behavior (Diamond & Allcorn, 2003) and leadership (Maccoby, 2004), but not specifically to manager-staff relationships. Certainly one can see how various components of psychoanalytic theory, such as projective identification (Klein, 1946) and the re-enactment of family dynamics (Dattner, 2010) apply to transference in the workplace, but they are never explored in this particular context and offer a manager no practical guidance regarding how to respond effectively to transference. Mandel (2006) does present some helpful ideas for the manager, but they are limited and are not grounded in theory. This article is designed to address these shortcomings.

Given the complexity of the phenomena that transference describes, it is essential to rule out simpler explanations of manager-staff interactions before concluding that transference is the concept that best describes what is being observed. There are both external and internal explanations for emotional pain that are far simpler than transference. They must always be considered first.

The organizations we work in and the people we work for can be the cause of significant emotional pain for their workers. Frost (2003) observes that both can be toxic. “Companies merge, bosses make unrealistic demands, people lose their jobs. Such outcomes can leave people feeling frustrated, angry hopeless or despondent.” Further causes of emotional pain are “incivility, interpersonal incompetence, malevolent intention, thoughtless institutional practices, and external jolts and traumas.” Cultural factors can also be a significant contributor to miscommunication and tension in the workplace (Gordon, Whelan-Berry, & Hamilton, 2007). Fineman (2008) describes how these factors drive the establishment of the social rules which inform us what is appropriate to express and feel in the workplace. What is expressed or not expressed will make a difference in whether a person advances or stagnates in a given organizational culture.

There are psychological theories which address interpersonal discord which can explain manager-staff conflict for more simply than transference (Wilmot & Hocker, 2001).

Emotional contagion theory, for example, summarized by Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson (1994), demonstrates that negative emotional experiences can be the product of emotional contagion which is observed to occur in a manner that is “automatic” and “unconscious.” Without conscious awareness we mimic and synchronize our expressions, movements, and behaviors with those with whom we are interacting. Moment to moment our perceptions are altered and our emotions are activated by this feedback loop. As a result, we tend to “catch” the emotions of those with whom we are interacting. Thus, emotions are said to be contagious.

In the business community Goleman’s (1998) theory of emotional intelligence has found a receptive audience because its skill-based approach is a good fit with a results-driven environment (Jordan & Troth, 2004, 2006), though it is not without its detractors (Fineman, 2004; Eysenck, 2000; Locke, 2005). For Goleman, the skills needed to manage conflict are a combination of what he terms “social awareness” and “relationship management”. George (2000) views these skills as essential to effective leadership.

Transference theory is not in conflict with emotional contagion theory or emotional intelligence; it complements them. Transference can be thought to represent an example of a specific approach to applying the listening, communication, and negotiating skills that Goleman presents for resolving manager-staff conflicts. It provides an explanation for a subset of “contagious” interactions where there is a clear interactional theme and emotional tone that derives not from the present interaction between two people, but from highly charged interactions which occurred in the past for one of the participants. Most likely these historic interactions were between parent and child and left the child feeling overwhelmed and psychologically (and possibly physically) injured. Studies show a clear link between child abuse, PTSD and problematic adult behavior and health status (Felitti, V., Anda, R., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D, Spitz, A., Edwards, V., Koss, M., & Marks, J. 1998). It does not take a great leap of imagination to see how these, or other painful childhood experiences, could manifest themselves years later in workplace interactions. Emotional contagion theory neatly explains how managers can easily pick up on their employees’ distress. Transference sometimes offers the best explanation for the historic source and tonality of that distress.

METHODOLOGY

For the past ten years I have run a small, publicly owned managed healthcare organization. Before coming to work for this organization I was a senior executive at both a large national consulting firm and series of large managed care organizations owned by national insurance companies. I have had hundreds of people reporting to me either directly or indirectly over the course of my business career. However, as

neither an undergraduate nor graduate student was it ever my intention to work for an organization of any type or to be a manager. I simply wanted to be a psychotherapist, healer: a person who helped individuals recover from mental illness.

My training as a clinical psychologist prepared me to handle the complicated feelings that clients would bring to the therapist - client relationship. It was common, in fact routine and expected, that clients would project on to me feelings and attributes that had nothing to do with me personally. My graduate school training, internships, and residency program taught me about a phenomenon called “transference” and how to use it to help my clients to understand and address their most problematic behaviors, relationships, feelings, cognitions, and fantasies.

After being in private practice for several years, a number of life experiences led me to have an interest in business in addition to psychotherapy. At the end of the 1980's, a time when managed mental healthcare was just getting under way. I found an opportunity to work for a start-up company that grew by leaps and bounds, providing me with many opportunities to learn about business and to take on ever-expanding levels of responsibility. With the explosive growth of managed care generally, and managed behavioral health care specifically, it was not long before I was recruited by a major national insurance company to a senior management position. Four years later I was recruited to work for a large, national consulting firm. This firm worked directly with very large health care systems around the country. I had the opportunity to see and experience first hand how many different organizations worked (or didn't work) and how their senior managers effectively (or not so effectively) led them.

My twenty-seven years of experience as a psychotherapist has very much informed my twenty years experience as a manager. As a manager I had the opportunity to observe directly a whole host of behaviors that people only talk about with their therapists. I saw how people's emotional issues played out with their coworkers, customers, and supervisors. I saw how my own emotional issues played out with my coworkers, customers, and supervisors. It has been my observation that the most challenging emotional issues both for staff and managers are those driven by transference.

This article represents a summary and communication of these experiences. It also incorporates the observations of other clinicians who have worked as managers. After writing the article I did two things to verify that the thoughts I had about transference in the workplace were not mine alone. First, I spoke with scores of colleagues who also had both a clinical and business experience. Next, I conducted a survey of these clinician-administrators to quantify the utility of the concept of transference to their work as managers. The survey I developed was sent to 85 individuals. Of the 42

clinician-administrators who responded to the survey (a response rate of 49%), 95% indicated that they were either “familiar” or “somewhat familiar” with the concept of transference. 65% indicated that they found the concept “somewhat helpful” in understanding their staff’s behavior or they way staff related to others; 22% indicated it was very helpful. 57% indicated transference was “somewhat helpful” in understanding their own behavior in the workplace as well as feelings they had towards their staff. 30% said it was very helpful. 22% of this group provided specific examples of how the concept of transference was helpful to them in their work as managers.

The survey provides no information about the utility of the concept of transference to administrators who do not have a clinical background. The primary goal in writing this article is to familiarize these individuals with this concept so that they too can have the opportunity to incorporate it into their work. Additional surveys will need to be conducted at a later time to determine if this effort was effective.

STAFF TRANSFERENCE

An example of staff transference in the workplace is presented below, followed by discussion and analysis.

The manager reads an email from David (one of his staff) which implies that the manager’s most recent policy decision was poorly thought out and ill-formed. Although David’s email was sent to the whole department, the manager does not fire back a Reply To All message to correct what David has written. Instead, the manager walks over to David’s office to speak with him. The manager asks David if he has a few minutes available to talk. David hesitantly says “yes.” The manager sits down and tells David in an unemotional manner what he believes was inaccurate in David’s email. He also describes the awkward position David’s misstatement puts them both in. David does not communicate his feelings directly. Instead, he becomes visibly more and more detached as he responds to his manager. The eye contact that is usually present when he talks to his manager is gone. David makes a number of downward glances as he describes what he will do to address the problem created by his email. His voice gets softer and softer. The manager has to lean forward to hear him.

Saying hello to the manager in the morning is normally David’s habit, but over the next week, he does not do so. When the manager passes him in the hall, David is stiff and formal. At points in his work day where he would usually drop by the manager’s office to consult, he doesn’t. This behavior makes it difficult for David to do his work. The nature of his work requires ongoing input from his manager for him to do his job well. David’s withdrawal makes it difficult for the manager to be an effective and supportive supervisor.

It takes two weeks for David's behavior and his relationship with his supervisor to return to "normal".

This example raises a number of important and related questions:

- Why did David react to his manager this way?
- A colleague of David's who knows him well tells the manager that, "David has a problem with authority figures." What does that mean? Is it even relevant? Is there a simpler explanation for David's behavior?
- How could this observation be useful to the manager in maintaining a positive and effective working relationship with David?

To answer these questions, it is essential to give thought to what it means to have "authority issues." In David's case, he grew up with an alcoholic father who was rarely interested in what he did. His father was not mean to him; he never said disparaging things about him. From time to time his father showed David affection and could say "I love you". The problem for David was that it was very hard to get his father to pay any attention to the things he did day to day. David felt that something must be wrong with him or inadequate if his father paid so little attention to the good grades he worked so hard to get or his many accomplishments in sports. David had to point these things out to him. His father would then say, "nice," and then quickly turn back to reading his newspaper or to a discussion of his own interests or problems. No follow-up questions or observations were directed David's way. In short, his father rarely expressed interest in the details of David's life or accomplishments. David came to believe he was a boring person whose accomplishments would always be second rate.

This experience left David hyper-sensitive to indications that his work was inadequate. When his boss pointed out the misstatement he had made, David withdrew and his inner dialogue became focused on negative self-observations. David did not knowingly say to himself, "my boss treats me just like my Dad. I'll never please him either." When he reacted to his boss in the same way that he reacted to his father, his thought process and the emotions and behaviors that accompanied these thoughts were outside of his awareness. These negative experiences came into sharpest focus when David was around his boss, so he avoided being in his vicinity as much as possible.

The manager found this behavior odd and disturbing. He did not understand that David was bringing behavior and feelings from the situation where it was learned (in David's family) to a new situation (the work place). The manager liked David. He saw him as highly competent. For the manager, the email was not a big deal, but not a matter to be swept under the rug either. What was a big deal to him was to be ignored;

that felt personal. For David to stop having eye contact with him felt personal. The manager saw that David's negative behaviors were not being directed at his peers or at the other managers - just at him, so the loss of "hi, how ya doing" in the morning felt like a snub. As David withdrew and his affect flattened, the manager felt both angry and sad. On an unconscious, transference level, he felt abandoned.

When co-workers change their behavior towards their managers like David did, managers quite often react on a personal level without thinking. When managers do not take the time to understand the interactions that precipitate a change in their staff's behavior, they can amplify the problem and make matters worse for both parties. If the manager in the example above had understood the meaning of David's behavior, it might have been possible to shorten the time it took David to return to his baseline affect and behavior. If the manager had created some distance between David's behavior and his reaction to it, this would have diminished the strength of his emotional response. It also would have avoided David's perceived need to withdraw even further from his manager in response to his manager's attempt to close the gap between them.

The key to a manager being able to create an emotional distance is to understand the role that he or she typically plays in psychological life of a staff member. Most often, a person's boss is the primary authority figure in that staff member's adult life. The manager hires and fires, writes performance reviews, makes compensation decisions, and writes job reference letters. This reality gives the manager considerable control over very important, survival level aspects of an employee's life. There is no comparable level of control that the employee has over his manager's life. The only comparable power relationship in most people's lives is that of parent and child. This is precisely why manager-employee relationships are so powerfully influenced by their employee's experience with the authority figures of their youth. As the person with significant power and control over their supervisees' work lives, a manager is going to be seen through the lens of a lifetime of experience with authority figures. The workplace is more likely to provoke transference reactions that are a response to the question of "am I competent." In the home, the question underlying a transference reaction is more likely to be, "am I lovable?" These dynamics have been amply explored in the context of psychoanalytic psychotherapy (Etchegoyen, H., 2005; Racker, H., 2001) where the power relationship between the therapist and client is primarily based on fantasy.

The literature on leader-followership relationships (Gilbert & Matviuk, 2008) helps us to understand many of the dynamics that are common to relationships in work environment between two people of unequal power and authority. In organizations that have a clear hierarchy and congruent organizational culture, it is not surprising that

boss-subordinate relationships easily elicit memories of historic parent-child conflict. Parent-child relationships are inherently unequal. When painful experiences are perceived by the child to derive from that inequality, there is likely to be sensitivity later in life to interactions that occur in the context of similarly unequal power relationships. Transference theory is complementary to leader-follower theory in that it helps to explain the underlying themes that emerge in these relationships where there has been some past trauma. The types of issues that can provoke transference reactions are legion, but there are a number of interpersonal issues that are likely to be associated with transference in the workplace. When staff members are discussing them, the manager should pay extra attention. "Fairness" is an example of one of them. My observation, based on forty years of management and clinical experience, is that "fairness", in a social context, is about scarcity and how a limited supply of love and attention (real or perceived) gets divided up within a family. In many families, children have very real and painful experiences of there not being enough love or attention to go around. This occurs most often in families where there are multiple siblings, or a parent who sees him or herself in competition with their children for their spouse's affection. A shortage of parental nurturance is sometimes driven by real world constraints such as when parents need to work long hours to make ends meet; there is a disabled child who requires intensive support, limiting the time available for other children; or a single working parent struggling to raise children.

A shortage of love and attention can also result from a parent's emotional limitations. Parents who suffer from mental illness may be too preoccupied with themselves to nurture their children. They may see their children as competitors for scarce emotional resources. In such situations, a family culture is created that establishes an unchallengeable "truth" that there isn't enough love and attention to go around. Children who grow up in this type of family culture have their emotional antennae fine-tuned to detect the most minute variations in how scarce resources are allocated. When they grow up, they bring this sensitivity not just to the families they create, but to the workplace.

In the workplace, this sensitivity is not limited to resources that personally affect the person experiencing "unfairness". This issue generalizes to include sensitivity to how other people or groups of people are treated. This is a particularly tricky issue since there are true disparities in how people are treated in the workplace. Sometimes the manager will favor one staff member or group of staff members over others. Sometimes a manager may consciously choose a course of action that is unfair, but necessary for the success of the business. The literature on bias in the workplace, particularly as it relates to gender and social status, is extensive (Tiedens, L. 2000; Ollilainen, M. 2000.) .

What A Manager Should and Shouldn't Do About Staff Transference

In the vast majority of such situations in which transference is suspected it will take conscious effort on the manager's part to say, "wait a minute. I don't usually feel this way towards David and he doesn't usually interact with me in this way. What's going on here?" This pause to reflect may be the single most important action a manager can take to avoid a destructive cycle of transference, reaction and counter-reaction. Next, the manager needs to differentiate a "real" workplace issue or one that is influenced by emotional contagion from one that is influenced by transference? The primary evidence that transference is the driving force is:

1. The disproportionality between the supervisee's emotional intensity about an issue and its significance AND
2. A thematic consistency between the supervisee's current emotional/relational experience and one that occurred a number of years ago in a different relationship AND
3. Multiple instances of interaction in which #1 and #2 have occurred; there is a pattern.

A highly emotional response to some issues is perfectly appropriate and expected in many circumstances. For example, if a manager has to lay off 20% of a team, it can be expected that many staff members, both those who will be laid off and those who will not, will have strong feelings about their manager's choices and how they were made. As Frost (2003) notes, the workplace can often be the source of avoidable (toxic) pain. On the other hand, a highly emotional response by an individual staff member to an issue or event that only produces a mild reaction in other staff – or none at all – is an indicator that something other than this event or issue is provoking an unusual response. It could be a transference reaction. It could also be that something stressful is going on in a staff member's life (probably not in the workplace) that the manager does not know about. Perhaps a close friend has become ill. Perhaps there has been conflict with a spouse. Perhaps the manager is picking up on the staff member's intense emotions or that of a colleague (emotional contagion). In other words, just because a staff member's behavior at work is not easily comprehensible does not mean that it is transference.

Sometimes the manager knows enough about a staff member's personal history to draw a connections between past emotional injury and the current situation. There is a theme. Quite often this is not known, leaving the manager only with the ability to hypothesize that there may be such a connection. However, knowing the staff member's specific personal history is not essential. The manager is not a therapist and therefore does not

have the job of helping another person make the connections between specific past events and their experience in the present. The manager's job is to help staff succeed with their work. It is appropriate for managers to talk with staff about their relationships at work as well as their communication skills. When they are problematic and represent barriers to success, they must be talked about. For most workers, these aspects of their work are as vital to them and to their organization's success as technical skills. So, when such discussions occur and transference is suspected to be a factor, it can be helpful for the manager to wonder out loud, "you know, I'm not quite understanding what is going on between us. I sort of feel like you are talking to me and someone else at the same time. I don't know. Does that make any sense to you?" There are many variations on how to phrase this idea, but they all should have the quality of raising a question and then leaving it up to the other person to decide whether to attempt to fill in the blanks (Ablon & Bernstein, 2011).

There is nothing a manager can or should do in a given moment to push a staff member to cross a relationship boundary that has been erected for purposes of safety. The best they can do is to try to earn their staff's trust. As this occurs, staff's sense of what is safe to talk about may expand. There are a number of things I have observed that managers can do to earn trust. First, they can honor their staff's boundaries and, within reason, to tolerate their distrust. This communicates to staff that they have control over where the boundaries are set; the manager will not violate them. Second, they can acknowledge their own mistakes. Managers don't always do the right thing or say things in the most helpful or sensitive manner. Such admissions will often earn the manager more trust with their staff than a year's worth of "perfect" behavior. Managers can't expect staff to back off a highly cherished, but erroneous perception or perspective if they can't do that themselves (Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006)..

Third, they can be patient, giving their staff an opportunity to have a positive and potentially corrective emotional experience with a new authority figure. However, managers must be realistic. Transference issues are very resistant to change. The person with a transference issue views interactions with others through a lens that filters information so that it confirms a strongly held world view. Most often, just being aware of this phenomenon and finding ways of working around it is the best the manager can do. Managers should avoid reacting defensively or angrily to transference because this will make a difficult situation even worse.

A positive working relationship with staff is essential to a manager's ability to create functional teams and to achieve measurable goals. Sometimes transference manifests itself in ways that are disruptive of workplace relationships. To effectively deal with these situations, the manager must focus on performance, not psychology. Every

workplace has (or should have) a process to follow when an employee's work becomes problematic. The manager should follow that process, referencing in writing the specifics of the staff member's job description and the observable behavior and objective performance that are evidence of the staff member's inadequate job performance. The manager's theory about the psychological issues driving a staff's behavior is conjecture and irrelevant to a formal evaluation. If problems are noted, these need to be communicated. Staff's progress towards implementing corrective actions need to be monitored and documented. It is always a good idea to consult with Human Resources (if available) to be sure that all the required steps of the performance improvement process are being followed and to listen carefully to their suggestions and recommendations.

MANAGER TRANSFERENCE

Just as staff members can bring the influence of their childhood and other formative experiences into their relationships with their managers, managers can bring the influence of their childhood and other formative experiences into their relationships with staff². Unlike a therapist, who may have years of training, the average manager has no training in this area. Manager transference is rarely taught in business school and on the job training or supervision related to this phenomenon ranges from rare to non-existent³. A manager may hear from time to time from his supervisor that he or she has "issues" that are getting in the way of work and relationships, but this conceptual framework is too narrow and superficial to be helpful.

Managers who do know about transference are inclined to think, "we may bring transference to our relationships with staff once in awhile, but staff transference is much more common." This is not accurate. We all bring the sum total of our experiences and who we are into our relationships. We are just as likely to project transference as our staff. But there is a difference: it is *the manager's* job to deal effectively with transference issues.

² Described as "counter- transference", this concept was presented in public for the first time by Freud at the Nuremberg congress of the International Association of Psychoanalysis in 1910. This concept, along with the concept of transference became more elaborate and refined over the course of Freud's career and that of his followers. These concepts are still a cornerstone of modern psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic therapies. (The American Psychoanalytic Association, 2011.)

³ This statement is based on a review of course listing of major American business schools as well as discussions with many business school faculty and students.

The first step in this process is for managers to recognize when they can be the source of transference in their relationships with staff. This is quite difficult. There will be no neon signing flashing “manager transference” - just the contrary: every fiber in the manager’s body will be crying out, “this is real!” Strong feelings are the first clue that either the manager is having a transference reaction to a staff member or that the manager is responding to a staff member’s transference. Strong feelings in a business relationship are not uncommon (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987), but they usually can be traced to a matter that is business related, such as a disagreement about a company policy or decision, or a personal conflict that does not require a consideration of possible unconscious conflict to make sense of.

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START OF PASTE

To see manager transference in operation, I will start with an example from my own experience. In this example I am in both a staff and manager role. Cultural/diversity issues make the situation even more complex.

I have won the bid to manufacture several hundred thousand promotional items for a large multi-national corporation. It is my biggest job ever. The person I report to at MegaCorp is older than I am. I feel incredibly grateful to him for “giving” the job to me. I am hell bent on doing a good job for him. Through an intermediary I locate and contract with a factory in Taiwan to produce the hand-painted item. It is painstaking work. It takes longer than expected to craft each object. Although this is job #1 for me, it turns out not to be the top priority for the manufacturer who works for me. He has orders from many customers to juggle. Production falls behind schedule. Deliveries are late. The project manager I so want to please at MegaCorp is not happy with me. His manager is coming down on him for the delays.

I fly to Taiwan go to have a “come to Jesus” meeting with the factory owner. I read him the riot act and then made an impromptu speech to his assembled factory workers that I am sure will be inspirational. Both the dressing down and my speech backfire. The factory owner loses face with me (the person he wants to please) and with his workers. Passive resistance prevails and orders are late. Neither my MegaCorp boss nor the factory owner will ever work with me again..

The intense and personal feeling I brought into my relationship with the factory owner compromised the work I needed to him to do for me. He felt less motivated to work hard for me after my visit, not more. I had acted uncharacteristically harsh with the

person who worked for me and totally lost sight of the cultural factors that were at play in this situation. This behavior was brought on by the intense need I felt to please my boss. A desire to please one's boss is not by itself irrational, but the level of intensity I was feeling crossed the line. My boss in this situation was a stand in for the father who never paid much attention to me. My fear of falling out of his good graces then carried over into my relationship with the person who worked for me, the factory owner. A single transference issue mucked up two relationships, one in which I was the manager and one in which I was the subordinate. Given the reality that most managers have relationships up and down the food chain, it is not unusual that transference issues play out this way.

It should also be pointed out that I was both a buyer and a seller in the example above. These roles very much run parallel to that of manager and staff, as do their associated forms of transference.

A second example of manager transference:

The manager is incensed that Richard is late to work again. It is the third time in two months and this time he kept a customer waiting while making up a lame excuse to explain his performance. The coworker that attempted to help the waiting customer is miffed at her manager and gives him a look that says, "how come you can't manage this employee with on-going performance problems?"

The manager decides he's got to do something about this. He used his electronic appointment scheduler to set up a meeting with Richard the next day. He doesn't say what it's about.

As the manager drives home he imagines what he will say to Richard the next day. The manager does not get much sleep that night. He keeps going over and over in his mind how the conversation will go in the morning. The wake-up alarm sounds. The manager is exhausted. He dreads going to work. He feels angry. He feels nervous. Ten minutes before the meeting he gets the runs.

During the first half of the meeting the manager feels like he is only half in his body; he is not entirely present. Very little goes as he expected. Richard brings things up that never occurred to him. He's not sure how to respond. The meeting ends without the resolution he imagined. There really isn't any resolution. He feels a little foolish. What was he so steamed up about.

Differentiating Between Staff and Manager Transference

It is not often easy to figure out whether transference is an underlying factor in intense a manager's intense interactions with staff and whether the manager is reacting to his staff's transference or visa versa. The step by step process described below is designed to help the manager answer these questions.

Step #1: consider the possibility that what you are feeling is either manager transference or a reaction to Richard's transference. The act of stepping away from one's experience and attempting to examine it as objectively as possible is the single most important thing step in this process. "Considering the possibility" does not presume that the manager is, in fact, experiencing transference. What it does is create a neutral mental space that is open to a wide range of ideas and objective thinking.

Step #2: rate the intensity of your experience. On the 1 – 10 scale below pick the number that corresponds with your current internal state when thinking about this relationship.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
None	Low	Low+	Moderate	M +	M ++	High	High+	High++	Overwhelmed

Note: feelings, thoughts and fantasies are all interrelated. They constitute a three-way prism through which we experience ourselves. There is great debate into the field of psychology as to which component is primary. There is no definitive answer to the question. Fantasies will evoke thoughts and feelings. Thoughts will evoke feelings and fantasies. Feelings will evoke thoughts and fantasies. Some people are more feelings oriented and for other people, thoughts play a bigger role in their mental life. Fantasies generally occur in the background of our psychological life, but for some people they are front and center. For "rate the intensity of your experience", these variations do not matter. The rating is all relative to what is "normal" for you. Not only is there individual variation between which component of experience is dominant, what is a "normal" intensity of experience for me could be a very slow day for you or it could be close to overwhelming for you. This is YOUR scale and your scale only. Its only purpose is to help you identify when YOU are having an intensity of experience that is unusual for YOU.

Any rating above a 6 should trigger Step # 3: take stock of your feelings, thoughts, and fantasies as well as your behavior. Take as objective a look at all three components of your experience as you can. Let's call this an Experience Inventory.

Behavior	Thoughts	Feelings	Fantasies
Checking and rechecking email Sleep problems – keep waking up; difficulty going back to sleep.	<i>Richard is wrong. He doesn't understand what he's talking about.</i>	Angry. Exhausted. Nervous.	Richard's apology to me. Endless variations of new emails I could write.
Difficulty concentrating on and attending to other things.	<i>I misjudged him. He's really dumb. A moron.</i>	Pissed off; annoyed. Disappointed, hurt.	Confronting Richard. Firing Richard.
Changes in eating behavior.	<i>He's going to be sorry; everybody's going to see how wacko he is.</i>		<i>A Dream: I'm back in high school. I jump up on stage to make a speech.</i>
Loss of libido (sexual interest).	<i>How come I'm the one who has to be 'reasonable' here.</i>		<i>Realize I have no pants on. The principal tries to hide his laughter, but I see him. Wake up in a sweat.</i>
Uncharacteristic interactions with people both at work and outside work.	<i>I wonder what my boss is thinking about this.</i>		

Step # 4: create a list of the “issues” that are painful or difficult for you to deal with. To help you get a feel for this, I have created a number of categories for you to think about and I have filled in the matrix in with some examples. Yours will be quite different. The list is reusable whenever you get to Step 4 in this process. Don't be surprised if the list gets longer over time as you learn more about yourself through “considering the possibility”.

Step # 5: decide whether what you are experiencing is transference.

Compare your Experience Inventory with your list of issues. Ask yourself honestly if your current experience might relate to your personal issues.

Ask yourself if your current experience might relate to issues you have not yet identified. Consider what that might be.

Consider the possibility that the disconnect between you and your staff is due to cultural factors including gender and age differences.

The honest answer may be “no” to all three questions. The goal of this exercise is not to find transference wherever and whenever possible. You want to be accurate in your assessment of what is going on. But understand this: admitting to yourself that what you are feeling is transference is the equivalent of an alcoholic saying “I have an addiction.” The metaphor is apt not just because it evokes how hard it is for us to admit such a thing to ourselves, but because it is a fact of psychological life that we are all “addicted” to the reality of our feelings. We experience particularly strong feelings as “truth”. They are felt with almost religious conviction. In fact, the more righteous we feel in our convictions, the more we should suspect them as being transference. A strong conviction and a righteous conviction are qualitatively and psychologically different.

The managers should not talk with staff about their transference. These are their own personal issues. They should not burden staff with them; they are our issues to deal with. However, from time to time we will not be successful at containing our own issues. They will affect other people in our lives, including our staff. When a manager realizes that and observes that he has hurt a co-worker in some way, it is our job to apologize and to rectify the situation. This does not require divulging the details of our personal lives. That would neither be helpful to us nor to those who work for us. For the manager to say, sorry, this was “my issue” or “my problem,” is sufficient. When managers model taking personal responsibility for their actions, that will form the basis for a work culture that is based on this value.

Step # 6 : determine whether you need some outside help.

At this point in the process you are probably feeling calmer. The preceding steps have required you to take a step back from your feelings. Doing so separates your emotional state from the thoughts and fantasies that were the drivers of your highly charged emotional state; it disrupts the feeling-thought-fantasy loops we get caught in that keep us revved up. However, if you are not feeling calmer, or you assess that you are not feeling calm enough to deal with the situation with your staff in a constructive manner, then you should get outside help. Recognizing when you have reached your limits is the hallmark of professionalism. It is not a sign of failure. Failure is continuing along a path that is not healthy for you or helpful to your staff. Failure is not recognizing that

you have limits. We all have limits. When you have reached your limits, consult with someone who is likely to be helpful to you: your supervisor, a counselor or psychotherapist, or your physician.

Discussing your situation with a trusted friend or family member is an option, but remember that managers have an obligation to protect the confidentiality of their employees. If the manager cannot find a way to adequately disguise the identify of who they are talking about, then they should not discuss any personnel issues with ANY person who is not legally bound by confidentiality laws – even spouses. Managers should also understand that transference is a very complex psychological phenomenon. Trusted friends and family members may provide a safe relationship in which feelings can be expressed, but they are unlikely to have the expertise to help the manager figure out what is psychologically going on.

If the manager already has a good relationship with a counselor, it makes the most sense to seek that person's help once again. Developing a trusting relationship with a new counselor will take time. If the manager does not already have such a relationship to tap into, the best option, if it is available, is to make use of an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) if an employer has one. EAP's will have a list of counselors who specialize in helping people with workplace issues.

I have taken advantage of my company's EAP on several occasions and found this service to be helpful. The counselor helped me separate out what were my issues from those of the employee I was having a problem working with at the time. She helped me to develop effective strategies for working with these staff. She also provided brief counseling for me, enabling me to come to grips with my own transference issues. If possible, managers should see the same EAP counselor whenever they need such help. The more a counselor gets to know a client, the more the client will learn to trust their counselor, and the more effective these sessions will be.

Small businesses will generally not have contracts with EAP's. They may not even have health insurance to offer their workers. However, in the Yellow Pages of virtually every telephone directory and through a simple Google search, it is not difficult to find a wide variety of helpful referral resources. Listings and search terms to use include counselors, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, mental health services, and drug abuse information and treatment.

END OF PASTE

CONCLUSION

Emotional life is inherent to life in the workplace and is often highly charged, not necessarily as the result of transference. Simpler explanations for the cause of conflict must be ruled out before transference is considered as an explanation of emotional expression or challenging behavior in the workplace.

When it occurs, transference is generally a destructive phenomenon in people's emotional lives and interactions. However, it cannot be managed out of existence or blocked at the door of the workplace. The incidence of mental health problems and illness are just too prevalent. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (2011), in any given year one in four adults living in the U.S will suffer from a mental disorder and six percent will suffer a serious mental illness. The workplace, unlike psychotherapy, is not the place one intentionally goes to work on unresolved personal issues, but they present themselves there nevertheless and jeopardize the relationships that are crucial to an organization's ability to meet its objectives. With education and conscious effort, a manager can recognize transference rather than amplify its effects. Managers will be more successful and satisfied with their work if they have a basic understanding of transference and a plan of action for when it occurs.

Author's Note

The author thanks the 42 clinician-administrators who responded to his survey as well as the many co-workers who have taught him about transference in the workplace. The examples of transference in this article, with the exception of his own, are drawn from the author's lifetime work experience as a clinician and manager; they depict no specific individuals.

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