



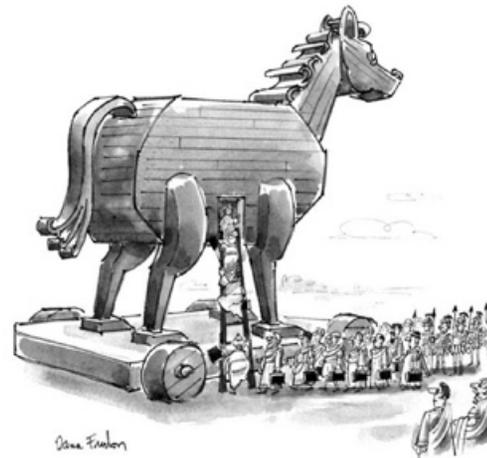
TODAY'S TROJAN HORSE

Diana McLain Smith

Over 3,000 years ago, the gifted leader, Agamemnon, convinced 130,000 men to leave their homes for a risky enterprise with the promise of uncertain profit. He looked to Achilles, the Mycenaean equivalent of a rainmaker, to bring home the goods, which he did brilliantly. But when Achilles and his men return to tally up and distribute the dividends—horses, livestock, slaves, metal crafts—a compensation dispute erupts and all hell breaks loose.

“Seer of misery!” says Agamemnon, casting the first parry. “Never a word that works to my advantage! Never a word of profit said or brought to pass.” After casting a few other barbs, he demands that Achilles even the ledger.

Achilles refuses. “Just how, Agamemnon most grasping man alive,” he sneers. “I know of no troves of treasure, piled, lying idle, anywhere. Whatever we dragged from towns, we plundered. All’s been portioned out.”



“We’re going to try to negotiate first.”

“Not so quickly,” A suspicious Agamemnon counters, “brave as you are are godlike Achilles—trying to cheat me. Oh no, you won’t take me in that way! What do you want?

To cling to your own prize while I sit calmly by—empty handed here?”

“Shameless!” yells Achilles. “Always shrewd with greed! ... we all followed you, to please you, to fight for you, to win your honor back from the Trojans. What do you care? Nothing. And now you threaten to strip me of my prize in person—the one I fought for long and hard . . . My honors never equal yours, whenever we sack some wealthy Trojan stronghold.”

You get the drift. For dozens of Homeric lines the two go a it, insults giving way to threats. Agamemnon calls Achilles a deserter. Achilles threatens Agamemnon’s life. Eventually news of the dispute reaches the gods, and several intervene but not before countless lives are lost and a petulant Achilles vows never again to fight for the Greeks.

Today's Trojan Horse

At least as far back as Agamemnon and Achilles on the beaches of Troy, relationships have had the power to create or to destroy enormous amounts of capital—human, social, intellectual, and economic. Yet few among us can say anything even remotely systematic about how relationships work, develop, or change.

The result? In 2006—the same year that failed relationships brought down Larry Summers at Harvard and Donald Rumsfeld at the Pentagon¹—a Booz Allen Hamilton study of the world's 2,500 largest publicly traded corporations reported a 318-percent rise in forced turnover among CEOs since 1995. A whopping one out of every three CEOs left involuntarily. One quarter of these followed conflicts with the board, up from a mere 2 percent in 1995.

What's behind all this turmoil? Hidden among the usual suspects—myopic vision, strategic missteps, managerial incompetence, corruption—is an answer so simple and sweeping it goes unnoticed: leaders aren't building relationships strong enough to withstand the intense pressures of today's hypercompetitive world. Just take a look at the death toll: Steve Jobs and John Sculley at Apple in the 1980s, Michael Ovitz and Michael Eisner at Disney, Carly Fiorina and the Hewlett-Packard board, the implosion of Bear Stearns. The list goes on and on.

Still, many of us treat relationships as if they're a necessary evil, believing work would be a whole lot more fun if it weren't for the people. You have to laugh at the thought, but you also have to wonder: If relationships can have such a decisive impact on the success, even the survival, of leaders and their firms, why do so many of us give them such short shrift? The answer lies in the outdated belief system that governs how we conduct business. Among the many beliefs that make up this system, four are killers. This manifesto is a call for us to shift to a new set.

Shifting Beliefs

Current Beliefs

Business is (and should be) conducted rationally

Relationships are soft

People are the problem: some of them are just “assholes”

Caution! Relationships may be hazardous to your health

Alternative Beliefs

Business is more rational when you factor in the non-rational

The soft stuff is the hard stuff

Relationships bring out the best and worst in people

Wait! There's more! Relationships are known to accelerate growth

Belief #1: Business is (and should be) conducted rationally

Business, most of us believe, is a matter of fact. At its core, it runs on numbers and graphs, objective judgments, the bottom line, hard-headed choices, and the effective design and efficient implementation of strategies, structures, and systems. Just count the number of times each day you hear phrases like, “These data suggest,” or “Feelings aside,” or “If you take a disinterested look at these trends, you’ll see”—as if facts speak for themselves without any human subjectivity entering in to say what those facts *mean*; as if human beings process facts like a computer without feelings or values or interests entering into the equation.

This daily effort to preserve rationality at all costs is the very definition of irrational: trying the same thing again and again despite overwhelming evidence it’s impossible.² Skeptical? Let’s look at the evidence. According to neurologist Antonio Damasio in *Descartes’ Error*, when someone thinks in purely rational terms, devoid of feeling—which, by the way, can occur only when someone suffers damage to the brain’s ventromedial area—that person finds even the simplest tasks hopelessly complex. Damasio illustrates just how hopeless by recalling one patient’s painstaking efforts to do something as simple as make an appointment:

For the better part of half an hour, the patient enumerated the reasons for and against each of the two dates: previous engagements, proximity to other engagements, possible meteorological conditions, virtually anything that one could think about concerning a simple date. (He was) walking us through a tiresome cost-benefit analysis, an endless outlining and fruitless comparison of options and possible consequences. It took enormous discipline to listen to all of this without pounding on the table and telling him to stop.³

As it turns out, emotions are rationality's saving grace. When our reasoning is cold-blooded, we can't assign different values to different options, rendering our decision-making landscape hopelessly flat.⁴ But even if that weren't the case, there's not much we can do about it. Thought and feeling are inextricably bound together, the brain systems required by the one enmeshed in those of the other.

Now, think of all those "elephants" in the room, all those "sacred cows," all those "undiscussables." Each one is a tribute to our efforts to ban subjective matters from business. They're also a constant reminder it's mission impossible. Still, we make believe every day that if we only try hard enough, we can relegate such matters to the softer periphery—which brings us to our second erroneous belief.

Thought and feeling are inextricably bound together, the brain systems required by the one enmeshed in those of the other.

Belief #2: Relationships are the soft stuff

Relationships, we believe, involve softer matters of the heart: feelings and intuition; subjective judgments; people's psychological needs, personal values, and political interests; mystifying interactions and all the emotional freight they carry. In this softer domain, you're more apt to hear things like: "My gut tells me," "I feel you're the right guy for the job," "I just don't trust this guy," "She really pushes my buttons" –all of it based on intuition or gut instinct devoid of analytic thought. Indeed, to operate otherwise is to be insensitive or to lack touch. No wonder we view relationships as soft.

Even so—and despite the companion belief that real men don't do soft, and women do so only at their own risk—we all know relationships matter. We see their effect on our ability to make good decisions or to get things done, and we feel their effect on our enthusiasm, energy, and motivation. But because relationships live on the softer periphery, we don't consider them the stuff of business. We view them as optional, addressing them directly only when absolutely necessary and, even then, only when we have the time—which is rarely, since most of us are already too busy doing the "real" work.

But wait a second. What about all those times you vent to your pals about that guy who's driving you nuts? And what about the hours you spend each day working around a dysfunctional relationship? Come to think of it, don't you go home and complain pretty regularly about that demanding client or boss of yours? And how many mornings do you wake up worrying about what that ambitious colleague of yours is going to do next?

All that time adds up. But since it lacks any of the rigor you bring to other aspects of business, it usually adds up to nothing but pain and frustration.

If anyone approached other aspects of business the way we approach relationships, you'd consider it gross incompetence. Imagine what you'd think if someone said, "Geez, I just don't feel like serving this customer segment anymore. My gut keeps telling me these guys just aren't worth

the investment. Besides, they dress funny.” You’d probably think twice about his judgment and put him through his paces. Yet I doubt you’d even blink if the same person said, “Geez, I just don’t feel like working with Fred anymore. My gut keeps telling me he’s just not worth the investment. Besides, he dresses funny.” You might not agree; you might even think him petty. But you’d be more apt to chalk it up to mushy things like taste, personalities, big egos, or poor chemistry—and leave it at that.

The point is, because we assume relationships are too soft to be analyzed and too sacred to be scrutinized, we tread softly—*so softly our relationships never develop much strength or resilience*. And that’s a BIG problem, because when you least expect it and most regret it, fragile relationships have an uncanny habit of blowing up and bringing everything to a halt.

We all know relationships matter. We see their effect on our ability to make good decisions or to get things done, and we feel their effect on our enthusiasm, energy, and motivation.

Belief # 3: People are the problem: some of them are just “assholes”

As regrettable as blow-ups are, they occur with a good deal of frequency, because most of us believe life would be a whole lot easier *if only* the other guy wasn't so stubborn, controlling, wishy-washy, anxious, unreasonable, selfish. . . . Fill in the blank.

The world is awash with books on how to deal with “difficult people”—how to handle their annoying quirks, how to avoid them and, if all else fails, how to exit, quit, or fire them. Underlying this massive sacrifice of trees to pages and pages of the same advice is the belief that the other guy is the problem and the problem is that *he's* difficult. (You're doing just fine, thanks). Indeed you've tried *everything*, and you've tried *harder and harder* to deal with him. But he's just *too* difficult. In fact, if this were the Olympics, you'd score a 10 for the difficulty of this dive. No wonder you do the equivalent of a belly flop every time you interact. It's *his* fault.

. . . most of us believe life would be a whole lot easier if only the other guy wasn't so stubborn, controlling, wishy-washy, anxious, unreasonable, selfish. . . .
Fill in the blank.

Those of us who grew up in cultures that value personal responsibility always feel a little queasy blaming someone else for our belly flops. But who can blame us for blaming others when other people can be—well, such *assholes*? Bob Sutton put it best in his new book, *The No Asshole Rule*, in which he does a great job of helping you spot and handle obnoxious people. He even helps

you see if *you* are one. And therein lies the rub. Assholicness, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. We rarely see it in ourselves.

It's enough to make a person want to start Assholics Anonymous. Maybe then we'd stop denying that we all act like jerks at one time or another.

In any event, the problem—and therefore the solution—lies not in the other guy nor in you, nor in the stars, nor even in the CEO. Sure, the buck may stop with him or her, but the problem doesn't start there. As you'll see later, it starts in the relationships we together create, because *relationships shape behavior at least as much as behavior shapes relationships*.

To see what I mean, picture yourself in two different contexts: the best team you ever worked on, and your childhood family at its dysfunctional worst. See the same person? I doubt it. Most people I poll report that on great teams they act quite maturely, yet when all hell breaks loose at home, they behave more like brats. Once up and running, relationships have an unnerving tendency to take on a life of their own. That's because this third belief hoodwinks you into thinking that the other guy alone is the problem and that it's his character that's at fault. With each of you looking at the other person's character, neither of you sees what you're each doing to elicit or reinforce or intensify the very behavior you don't like.

And then voila! You've rendered yourselves totally helpless to do anything to alter a relationship neither of you likes and both of you hesitate to address for fear of making matters worse—which brings us to the last belief.

Belief #4: Caution! Relationships may be hazardous to your (career) health

A cartoon I once saw captured this belief best by picturing two people at an outdoor café with a sidewalk sign next to them reading “Caution: Relationships at Work.” Most management experts agree, advising us to stay focused on what they call task conflict and to avoid what they call relationship conflict. Task conflict is “cognitive” and focused on the facts. Relationship conflict is “emotional” and focused on subjective matters like values, preferences, styles.

Hot and Cool Topics

	Cool Topics	Hot Topics
Data	<i>Accessible, relatively objective, easier to test different views</i>	<i>Inaccessible, controversial, more subjective, harder to test</i>
Certainty	<i>Moderate to High</i>	<i>Low</i>
Stakes	<i>Low to Moderate</i>	<i>High</i>
Goals	<i>Largely shared</i>	<i>Different beliefs, values, interests</i>
Discussion	<i>Reasonable, fact-based, collegial</i>	<i>Emotional, veiled attacks, defensive</i>

According to these folks, it’s possible to separate task and relationship conflict. But my colleague, Amy Edmondson, and I have found that’s not so easy. In practice, relationship conflict has a nasty habit of showing up uninvited whenever “hot topics” come up. Unlike cool topics, which can be resolved by appealing to shared goals and drawing on common facts, hot topics—whether to abandon a failing business, invest in a risky venture, close down factories—are harder to resolve. People dispute the relevance or validity of the facts, stakes are high, certainty is low, and people’s interests, beliefs, and values come into play.⁵

The point is, when you’re dealing with hot topics, it takes longer to reach resolution. With the competitive clock ticking, people quite naturally grow anxious and impatient; they get frustrated that it’s taking so long; they make

disparaging remarks about “analysis paralysis” when someone introduces new data or suggests that an option might require more thought; they wonder why those who disagree with them are being so stubborn; they speculate about the other person’s motives, question their character. Before you know it, you have a full-blown relationship conflict on your hands, and everyone loses sight of the task.

Management experts are right: this is a BIG problem. Only, the problem doesn’t lie in relationship conflict; it lies in our beliefs. They hamstring us. With subjective matters outlawed, with relationships considered too soft *and* too hot to handle, and with the other guy causing all the trouble, people can only hope for the best and expect the worst.

Hardly a winning approach.

All it does is guarantee that the conflict will escalate until it *does* cause harm. Now utterly convinced that relationship conflict *is* hazardous to their health and the health of their company, people continue to avoid it and never build the competence needed to make something good come of it. Even worse, they never notice the self-fulfilling power of their beliefs.

New Beliefs for a New Era

The reason you can't open a newspaper without finding an example of a failed relationship is that we're so good at wrecking them. Not intentionally, for sure. But predictably nonetheless. Why? Because the above beliefs lead us to repeatedly and predictably create relationships that are too fragile to withstand the unrelenting pressures of today's fast-paced, increasingly interdependent, intensely competitive world.

We need a new set of beliefs—ones we can use to build relationships strong enough to weather whatever circumstances come our way. Here are a few candidates for you to consider.

Alternative Belief # 1: Business is more rational when you factor in the non-rational

Since people can't help but bring their feelings, interests, preferences, and needs to work, it's irrational to think that these motivations can be cast aside. "Executives in charge of a company do not look exclusively at what a company might do and can do," says renowned strategy expert Kenneth Andrews, hardly a touchy-feely guru. "In apparent disregard for the second of these considerations, they sometimes seem heavily influenced by what they personally *want* to do."⁶ I've certainly found this to be true. I've also found that the problem lies not so much in the subjectivity people bring to work but in the culturally mandated pretense they have none.

Not only is this disappearing act impossible, it's self-defeating. As soon as people shove their subjective considerations under the table—where they can be seen but not heard—people start acting like children, even juvenile delinquents. Before you know it, Peter's secretly borrowing from Paul who's stealing from Bob who's undermining Alice who's sabotaging Ted—none of it with ill-will, all of it boiling down to a convoluted effort to watch out for their own values or wants or beliefs, while acting as if they're not. Small wonder relationships suffer.

The alternative is to bring subjective considerations out of the closet, and once out, to wed them to fair and open (but not dispassionate) analysis by generating facts everyone considers relevant, by exploring how people view those facts in light of their differences, and by inventing options people can assess in light of their different values, beliefs, and interests. In other words, since we can't get rid of subjectivity, why not put it to work and see what it can do for us?⁷

How? Well, let's say a senior vice president, whom I'll call Rob, believes that his company will best succeed by continuing to invest in an historically lucrative but now struggling product line, which just happens to be one of his. And let's say he has a self-interest in maintaining that belief because his job is to run that business, he has a special affection for that product line, he values the firm's design heritage, and he likes and wants to keep his job. Right now, we'd all tell him—directly or indirectly—that his personal feelings shouldn't affect his judgment. He should be dispassionate; he should let the facts fall where they will.

The problem lies not so much in the subjectivity people bring to work but in the culturally mandated pretense they have none.

But he won't. No one would. As long as subjective considerations stay locked in the closet, people will quite unwittingly twist their facts and contort their arguments until they fit what they believe, want, prefer, value, and need. Worse, everyone else at the table will see it, mistrust their judgment, and proceed to discount their entire argument, including their conclusions—*even when their conclusions make sense on the merits.*

And that's a BIG problem, because once you get to this point, the merits no longer matter. All anyone cares about is sniffing out the other guy's motives and second-guessing his character.

Now consider a different scenario. Imagine that instead of hiding his feelings or disguising his self-interest, Rob reveals them and invites people to explore them. What happens next? Well, for starters, let's suppose that Rob, like all people, has more than one interest. In fact, he has multiple interests, preferences, values, needs, and so on. Why not explore what will happen if only one of those prevails?

You might, for example, say something like, "Let's say we continue to invest in this product line, but over time, your belief in it doesn't pan out. At that point, the product line, your unit, and our business will be in worse shape than they're in now. Assuming no one wants that, let me ask you this: what would lead you to reconsider your belief, and at what point in time would you think it reasonable to reconsider?"

The preamble to this question reminds Rob that many different interests are at stake, including his own long-term interests. Then, the question itself opens up an opportunity for Rob to speak not only to facts but to all those non-rational considerations that usually go unspoken. After all, perhaps he'd reconsider if people addressed the ways in which his unit is treated, which he feels is unfairly. And perhaps he'd reconsider if someone addressed his worries that the company is losing touch with its design heritage, which he deeply values. Whatever his answer, if it includes all the rational and non-rational factors that shape it, you'll see what you need to address to reshape it. It will also give Rob a greater opportunity to reshape yours.

To give another example, let's say that later on, you ask Rob what he'd need to turn around the product line. And let's say he tells you that he needs greater investment. You might say something like this: "Okay, let's suppose we go ahead and do that. It's likely we'll then need to invest less elsewhere. So two questions: any thoughts on where, and what would have to be true for that trade-off to make sense—not just for you but for others and the company as a whole?"

Like the first question, this one requires Rob to consider all the different interests at stake—not a bad discipline for a senior leader. Even so, Rob need not bear the burden for answering by himself. The whole group might explore whether that trade-off makes sense, looking at it in light of their different values and interests and any data they consider relevant. And where people’s interests collide, as they often will, you can put the group to work inventing options that address as many as possible. This way, you’re more apt to end up with several good options to choose from rather than just one option to accept or reject based on feelings masquerading as facts.

Whatever his answer, if it includes all the rational and non-rational factors that shape it, you’ll see what you need to address to reshape it.

It’s hard to imagine such a conversation, isn’t it? In part, that’s because these examples are so cursory they raise a lot of questions.⁸ But it’s also because it’s so novel. You rarely hear people explore hot topics so directly or see them hold someone so accountable for his views. It’s not business as usual, as our shared belief in rationality defines business as usual.

Trouble is, that belief has all the trappings of rationality but none of its substance.

In the coming years, as the world gets smaller and competition intensifies, it will become progressively harder to push people’s interests, values, and emotions aside, and the more like make-believe this belief in pure rationality will become.

Alternative Belief #2: The soft stuff is the hard stuff

We may think of relationships as soft, but we sure don't think of them as easy. That's why Paul Allaire, the former chairman of Xerox, once said the soft stuff is the hard stuff.⁹ In large part this is because we've relegated the soft stuff—politics, culture, relationships—to the non-rational periphery where analysis fears to tread.

Indeed, the idea of systematically analyzing a relationship is offensive to some. Others wonder whether it's possible to be cold-blooded and hard-headed about a hot-blooded domain that's ruled by the heart. Well, you can't. But you can be a lot more intelligent about it. How? By periodically shifting your attention away from a person's character and putting it on the character of a relationship.

All relationships have an identifiable character we intuitively recognize: the dominating boss/submissive subordinate, the adversarial competitors jockeying for position, or to use a classic, if sexist, example: the nagging wife/withdrawn husband. In each case, one person's actions—say, a threat or attack—triggers reactions in another (defensiveness or anger) that lead to actions (counter threats or counter attacks) that reinforce the first person's reactions and actions—and so on. Repeat the cycle, and you have a pattern. Repeat the pattern, and you have a relationship with a distinct character or structure.

Every day I observe and record how people interact, and I map the patterns of interaction that define the character of their relationships. It's what I do for a living. In this respect I'm a bit like a cultural anthropologist, moving among the natives, studying their behavior, and with their help, figuring out what their behavior means. My data include transcripts of audio or video recordings that capture what people actually feel, think, and do with each other. Far from soft, these data are rock-hard facts, especially when compared with quantitative data. Much quantitative data—what we now think of as hard, concrete facts—are really quite soft and abstract.

Think about it. We come up with a question—say, how’s morale? We create abstract categories related to that question, categories like trust, confidence, or autonomy; we use these categories to formulate statements in some kind of survey; we give the survey to lots of people; we ask them to respond to our statements according to some scale; and we count their answers. In the end, we have what we believe to be facts about the degree to which some number of people do or do not trust their boss, have confidence in the leadership, or exercise autonomy. What we actually have is what people *say* they think, feel, or do in response to *our* categories—not what they actually think, feel, or do—or the categories they use to think, feel, or do it.

In some instances, this doesn’t much matter. But when it comes to relationships, this is a BIG problem. First, as we all know, what we say and do often diverges. And second, our categories often say more about how we think, not how someone else thinks.

So what’s the alternative? In relationships, it’s to watch what people *actually* do and to ask them what they’re feeling and thinking while they’re doing it.¹⁰ This way you can see how a relationship actually works—or fails to work. And the thing is, you can collect this kind of data any time you want. You just have to behave more like an anthropologist. That is to say, you have to look and listen much more closely than you do now, and you have to record by note or tape what you see and hear. Most important, you have to stay really, really *curious*, so you don’t kill good questions before you ask them.

Much quantitative data—what we now think of as hard, concrete facts—are really quite soft and abstract.

Perhaps another example will help. Take Jon, the newly appointed CEO of a B2B company I'll call Spendthrift, and Ed, his SVP of Sales for North America. For six months, Jon's been working with his team to come up with a new strategy for going to market. All of a sudden, seemingly out of nowhere, Ed slams on the breaks and calls everything they've done into question. John gets upset; Ed gets upset. The two go at it. They leave the room despairing.

As they leave, Ed wonders, *what makes Jon so sure this strategy is going to work?* Jon asks himself, *what's causing Ed to suddenly get cold feet?* But before these questions leave one set of neurons, another set is already firing off an answer:

"Ed's protecting his turf!"

"Jon's a control freak!"

End of story.

We all think we *know* what's going on inside people's heads and why they do the things they do. Sure, we may puzzle over behavior as Jon and Ed did. But all too quickly we come up with answers that make sense to us but that the other person would scarcely recognize. Even when these answers are directionally true, they usually lack the subtlety or the complexity that's always at work when people interact. In any other arena, we'd consider these snap judgments too gross or premature to give us any confidence. But in relationships we regards them as facts.

But let's say Jon and Ed decide to look at what happened in the hope of understanding it better and resolving their differences. Knowing they need some data to explore what happened, they write down what they said and did as well as what they thought and felt, so they can examine together how they got into trouble and how they might get out. Afterwards, they exchange what they wrote down, so they can get as complete a picture of what happened as possible. They even share their thoughts and feelings, viewing them for what they are: data on *their* internal states, not data on the *other person's* character or motives. The latter, they realize, can be understood only in light of that person's behavior and what *he* thought and felt.

Recording Data on Relationships

Ed's Thoughts & Feelings

Ed: *This strategy is being shoved down our throats!*

Ed: *Excuse me?! We've spent the last six months doing what you want!*

Ed: *Yeah, yeah, here we go again. What a control freak. But you'll regret it.*

What Jon & Ed Said/Did

Ed: *I've been thinking long and hard, and I think we need to revisit our strategy for going to market.*

Jon: *What?! We just spent the last six months coming up with it! You've got to be kidding!*

Ed: *No, I'm dead serious. It just doesn't make sense to rely so heavily on these dealers when they have so little incentive to promote our products.*

Jon: *That's just not true. Besides, it's way too late now to pull the plug. We can't unwind six months of hard work.*

Ed: *Why not? Either we do it now, or the market does it to us later...*

Jon's Thoughts & Feelings

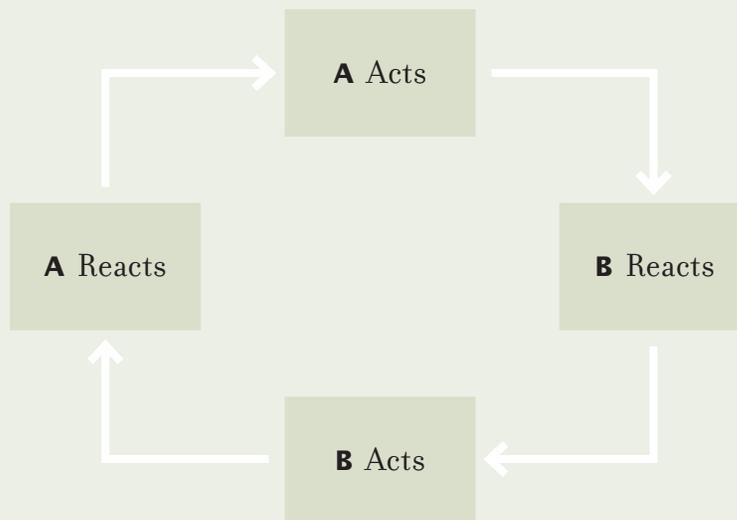
Jon: *What the hell is he talking about?*

Jon: *I don't see how he can really believe it. This has to be about something else.*

Jon: *You're just protecting your turf. Just because they're pressuring you to design less expensive products doesn't mean they won't try and sell what we now have.*

Finally, as they explore what happened, their overarching “research” question isn’t who’s to blame, but what leads each of them to think, feel, and act in ways that make it harder to come up with the best strategy possible. And since they both want to succeed, neither relies on his intuition alone to answer the question. They may start there, but they don’t end there. Instead, they use a set of analytic tools to look at the data they recorded—including a mapping template that helps them see how they each contributed to a pattern neither likes, wants, or intends.

Template for Mapping Relationship Patterns



With a map of the pattern now in hand, they can more easily explore what their relationship says about each of them. Even more important, they can use what they learn to alter whatever’s getting in the way of the business and their leadership of it.

Alternative Belief # 3: Relationships make people more or less difficult

One of my favorite Gary Larson cartoons imagines God as a mischievous chef, sprinkling a wide assortment of people onto earth out of large saltshakers labeled “White People,” “Brown People,” “Red People,” and so on. Then, with a thought bubble over God’s head reading, “And just for fun,” God picks up a jar labeled “Jerks,” and starts shaking it with great enthusiasm all over the globe. Classic Larson.

Let’s face it. The world is brimming over with difficult people—people who insist on getting their own way, who feel no compunction about exploding over the smallest error, who blame others for their mistakes, or who get so anxious they can’t make a decision if their life depended on it. But the belief that most of our relationship troubles are caused by a single difficult person (and that person isn’t you) overlooks two things.

First, the idea that a person operates the same way—that is, badly—under all circumstances is quite simply wrong. In fact, cognitive psychologists call it the Fundamental Attribution Error: the tendency to attribute behavior to a person’s disposition instead of situational factors. True, some people are more difficult than others more often than others, but there’s always a good deal of variability within that person depending on the circumstance. That means it matters how you interact with a so-called difficult person: You’re part of the situation that’s influencing his or her behavior.

Second and related to the first, relationships have the power to bring out the best and the worst in us. In a 12-year study of 720 adolescents, psychiatrist David Reiss and his colleagues discovered that some relationships exaggerate genetic proclivities—say, toward shyness or anti-social behavior—while others modify them.

These two factors add up to one BIG piece of advice: stop focusing so much on the other guy’s personality and start focusing more on the patterns of interaction the two of you create. The more you understand these patterns, the more you can avoid unwittingly reinforcing or escalating behavior you don’t like—which brings us to the last alternative belief.

Alternative Belief # 4: Wait! There's more! Relationships are known to accelerate growth

Most people believe that character is set at birth or during the first few years of life. It doesn't matter what does the setting—nature or nurture or a combination of the two. Most of us believe that once character is formed, it is more or less set in stone. Not so. Recent research suggests that people are far more malleable than you think.

Most of us believe that once character is formed,
it is more or less set in stone. Not so.
Recent research suggests that people are far
more malleable than you think.

Even our brains are surprisingly plastic.¹¹ “Nature has been very clever indeed,” says Gary Marcus, author of *The Birth of the Mind*, “endowing us with machinery ... so supple that it can refine and retune itself every day of our lives.”¹² The key to that flexibility, Marcus goes on to explain, lies in the structure of our brains. Our brains aren't so much *hardwired* (fixed and immutable) as they are *prewired* (flexible and subject to change). According to geneticists, our genes are continually working with our environment to define and redefine who we are by structuring and restructuring our brains.

If there's anything we're wired to do, it's learn. That means even folks arguably difficult by nature can become less so—at least most of them. It also means we shouldn't assume, as we almost always do, that someone's incapable of change just because our efforts to *make* them change fail. The biggest reason people don't realize their full potential for change is that we focus so much on their

innate traits we fail to see how our behavior is contributing to patterns of interaction that lock those traits in place.

To see how, consider the findings of behavioral geneticist Kenneth Kendler of the Medical College of Virginia who studies how families modify or exacerbate genetic traits. “Family is like a catapult,” says Kendler. “Kids with a difficult temperament can be managed and set on a good course, or their innate tendencies can be magnified by the family and catapulted into a conduct disorder.” In the latter case, a vicious cycle between parent and child often takes hold:

A child with a difficult temperament—irritability, aggressiveness—brings on parents’ harsh discipline, verbal abuse, anger, hostility and relentless criticism. That seems to exacerbate the child’s innate bad side, which only makes parents even more negative, on and on in a vicious cycle until the adolescent loses all sense of responsibility and academic focus.¹³

The same thing happens in all relationships. They act like catapults, accelerating either our development or our demise. Which occurs depends on how well we understand the way relationships work and develop, and on how well and how much we invest in turning them into contexts for growth.

So What?

Few businesses today get relationships right. That's why Scott Adams is a rich man, selling Dilbert cartoons on everything from T-shirts to calendars to books to mugs—most of them caricaturing the irrationality of relationships at work.

The first businesses to get relationships right will leave the others in the dust. Strategic errors will go down, while decision-making picks up; forced turnover will go down, while morale shoots up; inefficiencies will go down while productivity climbs; and so on.

I know, they seem so harmless, relationships: feel-good stuff that's nice to have but not all that necessary. But then so did that Trojan horse until it opened it up and all those warriors popped out.

Get relationships right, and they'll become your greatest asset. Get them wrong, and you'll either self-destruct or simply follow mediocrity into oblivion. 📌

FOOTNOTES

¹ To paraphrase accounts in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*: Lawrence Summers decided to step down last week after concluding that he could no longer contain the growing conflict between him and the faculty (see *NYT* 03/06/06 and *Washington Post* 02/22/06). The tensions between Mr. Rumsfeld and the military services date back to his arrival at the Pentagon in early 2001. Critics cite Rumsfeld's imperious manner, saying he clung to views with a stubbornness that defied dissenting opinions and ignored the reality of a war (see *NYT*, 04/14/06 and 11/09/06).

² A variant of Einstein's: "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

³ As reported in Malcolm Gladwell's book, *Blink*. Back Bay Books, pp. 59-60.

⁴ Antonio Damasio, *Descartes Error*. New York: Penguin, 2005, p. 51.

⁵ See Amy Edmondson and Diana McLain Smith, "Too Hot to Handle? How to Manage Relationship Conflict" in *California Management Review*. Fall 2006, Volume 49, Number 1.

⁶ Kenneth Andrews, *The Concept of Strategy*. Homewood, Illinois: Irwin, 1987, p. 53. His italics.

⁷ This is akin to what early management scholar Mary Parker Follet said of conflict. "As conflict--difference--is here in the world, as we cannot avoid it, we should, I think, ... set it to work for us."

⁸ For a more, see Diana McLain Smith, *Divide or Conquer: How Great Teams Turn Conflict into Strength*. Portfolio, 2008.

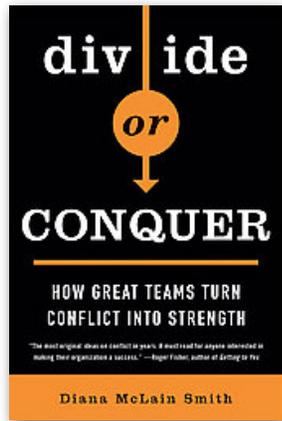
⁹ David Nadler and Michael Tushman, *Competing by Design*, New York: Oxford Press, 1997, p. 36.

¹⁰ For those worried about the reliability of self-reports, keep in mind that by demonstrating a genuine interest in understanding, you cultivate a much greater willingness to tell. For more on how, see Chapter 5 in *Divide or Conquer*.

¹¹ See Marguerite Holloway, "The mutable brain," in *Scientific American*. Vol. 289, Issue 3. September 2003.

¹² See Gary Marcus, *The Birth of the Mind*, pp. 45 and 98.

¹³ See *Newsweek*, Sharon Begley, March 27, 2000.



BUY THE BOOK

Get more details or buy a copy of Diana McLain Smith's [*Divide or Conquer*](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diana McLain Smith is a partner at the Monitor Group, a global management consulting firm, where she teaches, consults, and conducts research. She is also a founding partner of Action Design, which specializes in organizational learning and professional development. *Divide or Conquer* is her first book. Her more recent work can be found in *The California Management Review*, in Peter Senge's *The Dance of Change*, and in Brown and Wiig's *Corporate Communication*. Smith has taught courses and delivered lectures at the Harvard Law School's Program on Negotiation, the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and Boston College's Carroll School of Management.

SEND THIS

[Pass along a copy](#) of this manifesto to others.

SUBSCRIBE

[Sign up for our free e-newsletter](#) to learn about our latest manifestos as soon as they are available.

BORN ON DATE

This document was created on October 8, 2008 and is based on the best information available at that time. Check [here](#) for updates.

ABOUT CHANGETHIS

[ChangeThis](#) is a vehicle, not a publisher. We make it easy for big ideas to spread. While the authors we work with are responsible for their own work, they don't necessarily agree with everything available in ChangeThis format. But you knew that already.

ChangeThis is supported by the love and tender care of 800-CEO-READ. Visit us at [800-CEO-READ](#) or at our daily [blog](#).

COPYRIGHT INFO

The copyright of this work belongs to the author, who is solely responsible for the content.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit [Creative Commons](#) or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.

Cover image from [iStockphoto](#)®

WHAT YOU CAN DO

You are given the unlimited right to print this manifesto and to distribute it electronically (via email, your website, or any other means). You can print out pages and put them in your favorite coffee shop's windows or your doctor's waiting room. You can transcribe the author's words onto the sidewalk, or you can hand out copies to everyone you meet. You may not alter this manifesto in any way, though, and you may not charge for it.