

# THE NATURE OF HUMAN NATURE

By Phillip Van Hooser, MBA, CSP, CPAE



Why did she do that? Why would he say such a thing? You've probably asked yourself those questions from time to time thinking about vendors, employees, managers, friends or even family members. The answers rest in understanding the "nature of human nature."

I would suggest there is a single principle of human nature that drives our behavior. Being aware of this principle enables us to more successfully navigate the intricacies of leadership, as well as our personal and professional relationships.

#### WHY PEOPLE ACT THE WAY THEY DO

Understanding why people do what they do begins with understanding the cornerstone of all human behavior. That cornerstone simply stated is: All human behavior is directed toward the satisfaction of some need. Finally, the secret is unleashed! However, upon reading this statement, I doubt you slapped your head and shouted, "Eureka! I've found it!" No, instead you're probably thinking, "C'mon, Phil. Tell me something I don't already know."

Understanding that people act based upon their needs is almost a given. But to truly understand the magnitude of this concept, one must look past the obvious statement of fact, to the less obvious points of application.

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Let me ask you to review that cornerstone statement once more. This time, read it and try to determine what the single most important word in the statement is. Is it needs? What about satisfaction? Maybe you're considering the importance of the word behavior. No doubt each of these words are important in their own right.

However, I would suggest the single most important word to be considered is the little three-letter word all. Here's why. The word all implies total inclusiveness.

Our cornerstone statement does not begin with the words some or most. It begins with the word all. All human behavior – everything we do, everything we say, everything we think, and everything we don't do, don't say, or don't think – is directed toward satisfying the specific needs that exist within us, whether those needs are real or imagined.

We should stop wasting our time asking "why" someone behaved in one way or another. Instead, we should invest our time exploring what needs drive individuals to behave in such observable ways.

#### **PREVENTATIVE LEADERSHIP**

When was the last time you changed the oil in your car? I'll bet it was within the last 3,000 to 5,000 miles. How can I be so sure? It's simple. If you are willing to invest several thousands of your hard-earned dollars on an automobile, you are probably committed to doing your best to keep it operating in tip-top shape. That means preventative maintenance is critical.

What is preventative maintenance anyway? In layman's terms, preventative maintenance is the process of doing periodic, planned repairs on machinery before it becomes necessary to do so, in hopes of avoiding untimely and costly breakdowns. We change the filter in our air conditioner because we don't want a breakdown when it's 98 degrees outside. We change the oil in our car because we don't want to be stranded on the interstate with engine problems at 1:30 in the morning. Taking such preventative measures seems well worth the effort.

With the concept of preventative maintenance in mind, I would suggest that "preventative leadership" is equally important. Preventative leadership assumes that without careful, ongoing attention, people, like machinery, may eventually breakdown under the wear and tear of normal activity. What kind of breakdown am I referring to? Physical. Mental. Emotional. Professional. Potentially, all of the above. We need to do our best to assure that obstacles created by unsatisfied needs are identified and managed as quickly and painlessly as possible.

#### **GET SOME SATISFACTION**

There are at least three ways you can determine the specific needs people are struggling to satisfy. The first is obvious. You can ask them. Sometimes people will readily confide their needs. They do so hoping you can and will do something to help them satisfy those stated needs.

Other times they can't tell you because they haven't been able to clearly identify these needs themselves.

Finally, there will be still other occasions when the people you encounter know exactly what their needs are. But for personal reasons they simply won't tell you. Why? Because they are scared to death to be that open with anyone. They are fearful that sharing their most pressing needs will somehow come back to haunt them. They determine it's safer to suffer in silence.

The best way to determine the needs of others is still imperfect: Observe them. After all, careful observation of individual behavior should clearly indicate what their needs are, right? Well, maybe. Consider this one sticking point.

Can you observe a person, any person, 24 hours a day, seven days a week? Of course not. Therefore, observing people for limited periods can provide a skewed impression of what really drives their behavior. After all, there are occasions when we all intentionally modify our behavior while in the presence of others, such as parents, religious leaders, spouses, or maybe even our boss.

The absolute worst way to attempt to determine the needs of others is to depend on information gathered from a third party. There is no shortage of information available from third-party mouthpieces. However, the responses offered will always be tainted and biased (positively or negatively), based on the relationship we have with the individual in question.

To successfully determine the needs of others, we must continuously, conscientiously practice all three methods – ask, observe and listen to others. The results will be a truer picture of the actual needs driving individual behavior.

Okay, now comes the toughest question of all. What happens when needs are not met? After all, we all realize none of us will get everything we want or need in life. So, what then? Well, there are three predictable and observable behaviors I guarantee will be exhibited when people ultimately realize that their needs will not be satisfied. Be on the lookout for any or all of the following.

First, people will withdraw. There are two types of withdrawal – physical and emotional. Physical withdrawal is the most obvious. People simply leave. They pick up and go elsewhere in search of need satisfaction. Here today, gone tomorrow.

But the most common type of withdrawal is emotional withdrawal. With physical withdrawal, people quit and leave. With emotional withdrawal, people quit and stay. They choose not to get totally involved in anything. They do just enough to get by, but not enough to make a real difference.

The second predictable behavior is aggression. Try to remember the last time you said or thought, "What got into him?" or "I've never heard her talk like that before." Uncharacteristic aggressiveness is symptomatic of unsatisfied needs.

If you know someone that has been "uncharacteristically aggressive" recently, chances are very good he or she is struggling with a significant personal need that is not being satisfied. This situation needs immediate attention. It should not be ignored. Why? If the behavior being exhibited is already noticeably out of character for that individual, it is impossible to predict what he or she might do next in a further attempt to satisfy these needs.

The third very real behavior you can expect as a result of unsatisfied needs is rationalization. My favorite definition of rationalization is this. To rationalize is to tell rational lies. Think about it. Rational is another word for logical, believable or acceptable. Lies are misrepresentations, fabrications or untruths. In other words, people who resort to rationalization create a lie, tell it to themselves and then start to believe their own lie. That's scary. Yet, it happens every day.

#### **AND THE ANSWER IS . . .**

There is no easy answer to explain the complexities of human behavior. In the end, this article may have raised more questions than it answered. But, recognizing even the most obscure behaviors are intended to satisfy needs, we can now continue our search for those ever-elusive needs. Good luck in your quest.



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## **About Phillip Van Hooser MBA, CSP, CPAE**

For 20 years, Phillip Van Hooser has established a reputation among corporate meeting planners and association executives as a world-class keynote speaker, trainer and prolific author on leadership and customer service issues. Providing major corporations and associations in the U.S. and abroad with relevant solutions that transform the way their people lead employees and serve customers. For more information, please call 270-365-1536, email [info@vanhooser.com](mailto:info@vanhooser.com) or visit [vanhooser.com](http://vanhooser.com).