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BOOK OF THE MONTH SUMMARY

FOR MEMBERS

OVERVIEW

The Price of Pettiness

Bad Behavior in the Workplace and How to Stomp It Out

by Alex Alonso

Recommendation

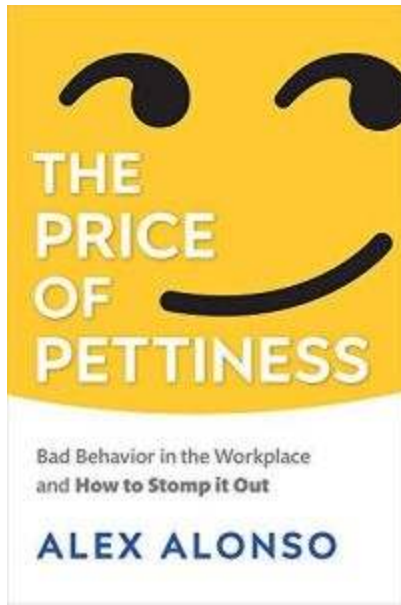
Alex Alonso, an industrial-organizational psychologist, decided to study petty behavior scientifically after his mentor of 10 years burned their relationship. An executive at the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), Alonso polled 15,000 HR professionals to determine the extent and level of pettiness within their workplaces. He provides a new theory of pettiness that describes the intensity of behavior and severity of outcomes. Alonso also provides a useful checklist for recognizing petty behavior and its consequences in the workplace.

About the Author

Industrial organizational psychologist Alex Alonso is chief knowledge officer at the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM).

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The Price of Pettiness

Bad Behavior in the Workplace and How to Stomp It Out

Alex Alonso
SHRM, 2019

Recommendation

Alex Alonso, an industrial-organizational psychologist, decided to study petty behavior scientifically after his mentor of 10 years burned their relationship. An executive at the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), Alonso polled 15,000 HR professionals to determine the extent and level of pettiness within their workplaces. He provides a new theory of pettiness that describes the intensity of behavior and severity of outcomes. Alonso also provides a useful checklist for recognizing petty behavior and its consequences in the workplace.

Take-Aways

- Psychologist Alex Alonso applied scientific discipline to studying pettiness.
- Trivial incidents are annoying, unpleasant behaviors that don't change outcomes.
- Minor incidents are obnoxious, mean-spirited behaviors that don't generate serious repercussions.
- Major incidents are offensive, consequential behaviors that cause short-term damage.
- Significant incidents are malicious, consequential behaviors that cause destruction.
- Some petty behaviors are so extreme, they become criminal offenses.

- Learn to recognize pettiness in yourself and others.

Summary

Psychologist Alex Alonso applied scientific discipline to studying pettiness.

Psychologist Alex Alonso offers a new theory of pettiness that examines the intensity and severity of petty behavior. He divides his overview into four quadrants that represent petty behavior as trivial, minor, major, or significant.

Trivial incidents involve annoying or unpleasant behaviors that don't affect outcomes. Minor incidents are obnoxious or mean-spirited, and people notice them, but they generate few repercussions. Major incidents involve behaviors that can damage a person or an organization in the short-term. Significant incidents can generate long-term, damaging consequences for an individual or organization.

According to a Pettiness in the Workplace survey that the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) conducted in 2019, 75% of respondents reported that perpetrators suffered no official consequences. When workplaces don't respond to pettiness, it erodes employee trust and lowers morale.

Trivial incidents are annoying, unpleasant behaviors that don't change outcomes.

Employees at an elementary school were required to wear closed-toe shoes with rubber soles and low heels because of the school's liability insurance. Every September, a veteran teacher questioned this rule. When she lost her official complaint, she enlisted a new colleague every year to complain. The new employee's supervisor forwarded the complaint to the administrative team, HR and the union representative.

This situation is a low priority for both sets of teams, but very annoying.

The union rep responded, annually, with the same boilerplate language declining the request. The veteran teacher remained unscathed because the complainer received the response.

Two analysts didn't like their manager because she would linger in their space and disrupt their work. The HR manager noticed a grocery bag full of stinky cheeses in the workspace, including limburger, Roquefort, and camembert. The younger analyst said their manager hated the smell of cheese, so they pulled it out every time she was in the office. Their passive-aggression bothered the HR manager, but the cheese-hating manager never said anything about it or complained, so HR was powerless.

This is the story of a three-day territorial skirmish during a two-week rebuilding campaign. The battlefield was a six-foot-long desk. The weapon was a 12-inch-wide file bin.

Two employees had to temporarily share space in a small room. The senior rep worked at a large table, while the new rep worked at a computer stand. Having no place on the stand to put his file bin, the new rep put the bin on a corner of the table. The senior rep put the file on the floor. The

new rep put it back on her table. This turf battle continued for three days. After the new rep complained to management, the employee relations department helped the manager approach the senior rep. He said the table belonged to the company and asked the senior rep if she'd rather keep the table and share space, or swap furniture with the new employee and use his smaller computer stand without sharing. She chose to keep her table and share the space, although, initially, she was nasty about it. The junior rep appreciated management not siding with the other rep just because she had seniority. Eventually, the two reps developed a good working relationship.

Minor incidents are obnoxious, mean-spirited behaviors that don't generate serious repercussions.

A white-collar firm had a power-hungry office manager who controlled office supplies. She wouldn't give employees more than one Post-it note pads at a time. All employees, including executives, had to plead their case for sticky notes. Those who thanked her profusely gained a single pad.

Small-minded people with a thirst for power can be very dangerous, especially when they lord it over everyone else above and below them.

A new employee asked if the office manager could put Post-its in a supply closet for everyone to access. This enraged her. A division president gave the new employee a pad from his stash of 20 – he bought his own case of Post-its and charged it to the company. The CFO also bought his own pads because neither executive wanted to deal with the office manager's pettiness.

At one company, a cliquy department's manager criticized everyone's personal appearance and style. One day, the manager berated an employee for wearing a faux fur jacket.

What animal did you scrape up for that thing? You look like you're wearing roadkill!

One of the employee's friends told HR about the manager discussing the "Roadkill Jacket" with colleagues after work. HR had the manager take training to learn how to treat her employees respectfully.

At a credit union, a teller requested a Friday off to serve as the best man at his friend's wedding. The teller submitted his request months in advance, but he didn't have sufficient leave accrued by the time of the wedding. The new HR coordinator thought his request was reasonable and suggested a few options to the HR generalist who had final approval: Let the teller take his leave unpaid; let the company advance his leave to him and subtract it later; or let him work half a day because the wedding was nearby. The HR generalist denied the request. The teller called in sick the day of the wedding. The HR generalist demanded a doctor's note, even though employees had to provide a doctor's note only after being sick for three days. Employee morale suffered after this event.

Major incidents are offensive, consequential behaviors that cause short-term damage.

Two men shared a small room, handling materials. The room had a thermostat, which one man set to 65 degrees: the other set it to 75 degrees. They switched back and forth for months until

they decided to settle matters with their fists. A manager broke up the fight. The company worried about injuries, room materials and potential litigation. One of the men had a documented temper. The company fired him and gave the other man a final warning, but he had no other incidents.

A new employee realized her job wasn't a good fit and turned in her two-weeks' notice to her manager. The manager sent her a text message on the phone, ordering her not to come back to the office again. She called HR, wanting to know why she was fired. The manager claimed her performance had been poor, but he had never discussed it with her or brought his complaints to HR. HR didn't care for his inappropriate text message. After discussing the situation, HR told the employee she was not fired, but they were accepting her resignation that day, so they could find a replacement. HR told the manager to involve them in future personnel issues and gave him more training.

Someone lost his job because a higher-up literally looked at him the wrong way.

A vice president (VP) of a publicly traded company in charge of more than 20,000 employees fired someone because the VP felt the employee did not look excited during a motivational speech. This employee had recently completed his six-month training and his peers liked him. Different managers tried to talk the VP out of his decision; the VP insisted. After the company fired the employee, his sales group had to put in overtime to compensate for the training wasted.

A 20-year-HR hospital veteran recounts how a group of senior nurses in a certain unit didn't want new nursing graduates joining them. The senior nurses would put junior nurses' names on a wrapped-up fish in the freezer as a message to say they would freeze them out. This bullying went on for almost a year until a new nurse complained. The veteran nurses confessed to HR, received reprimands, and were split up among different departments and shifts.

Significant incidents are malicious, consequential behaviors that cause destruction.

An engineering firm had a hard-working manager who was the longest-tenured employee but was quirky and didn't like change. He had never received a promotion. The COO valued his technical expertise, so she created a new position for him: a non-partner track director. The manager was so happy about the new position that he cried. The firm's external coach laughed when the COO told her about the promotion, and the other managers joined in laughing. The COO was stunned and quit less than two months later after having worked at the firm for five years.

It continued to irk me that none of the partners stopped to recognize their laughter as mean-spirited and inappropriate.

Because she had served as a bridge between technical and non-technical staff, the firm had to hire two people and expensive consultants to replace the COO.

A manager at a car dealership had high turnover but didn't realize she was the problem. She was smart and oversaw six people, but most of her employees didn't last more than six months. One of her soon-departing employees told HR about her behavior: She was a micromanager who

required her direct reports ask for approval for everything they did and didn't provide sufficient training.

The manager rarely took any leave. She would say: 'I can't take a full week off because you all don't know how to do your jobs.' 'This place would fall apart while I'm gone.' 'The department couldn't survive without me.' 'They can't fire me, I'm the only one here who knows how to do this job.'

The manager's department had good numbers, and the employees who stayed moved up. Losing employees every six months was untenable, however. HR found a mentor for the manager and put her in a year-long new-manager training program. After her training, direct report turnover decreased by 25%.

Some petty behaviors are so extreme, they become criminal offenses.

Some petty behavior crosses the line into unethical, immoral, or criminal behavior. Know when it's necessary to call the police or seek advice from lawyers to prevent harm to life and property.

Certain situations require intervention from higher authorities than your organization's leaders, ranging from assault, stalking, and threats of violence to fraud, forgery, and embezzlement.

A cook and waitress at a restaurant were in a romantic relationship that ended badly. During a dinner shift, they argued. The cook threw a 10-inch chef's knife at his ex-girlfriend, barely missing her face. Management fired him on the spot and called the police to escort him out. The restaurant gave him a no-trespassing order and warned all staff about their zero-tolerance behavior policy.

For two years, nobody realized that a senior payroll officer at a bank was stealing. She would keep the payroll accounts of former employees open and divert a month's salary to her personal account. A newly hired HR manager discovered the discrepancies.

Stealing was grounds for dismissal, and the bank could have pressed criminal charges against her after several departments confirmed the evidence. But because they were friends, the assistant general manager (AGM) didn't fire the payroll officer. Instead, he transferred her to another department. A year later, the CEO discovered the senior payroll officer had stolen more than \$250,000 in two years. She was charged with grand theft larceny and fled the country. The AGM became the bank's general manager, and later, was involved in his own financial scandal.

Learn to recognize pettiness in yourself and others.

Cutting down on petty behavior starts with learning to recognize it in yourself and others.

Consider how often you engage in various types of petty behaviors – from very mild to severe acts of pettiness. Monitoring your degree of pettiness can help you adjust your behavior.

Assessing the pettiness of others can help you better understand how to help employees perform better and achieve more job satisfaction. It can also aid you in putting together teams which will work together effectively.

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