

What if You are a Jerk But Don't Know It?

by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP

It seems impossible, but you could actually be a jerk. You may think you are a perfectly normal, fun-loving person that other people just love to be around, but you could be dead wrong and not even realize it. People might have low respect for you because of any number of bad habits or insensitive things you do or say.

Let's have a little fun with this analysis and see where it leads. Let's suppose there is a great bell-shaped curve in the sky that shows the distribution of official jerks. The center of the bell shaped curve is neither a jerk nor a wonderful person. To the left of the center are increasing levels of jerkiness. Individuals far to the left of the mean would be categorized by most people as jerks. The rest of the population are not necessarily jerks, and the ones to the right of the mean are great people.

Now, we separate out the jerks and put them all in a line. Maybe you've seen them at the grocery store in the express line with 20 items in their basket. We bring each person into a room individually and ask the person if he or she is a jerk. Note: At this point I am going to switch to the male pronouns "he" and "him" to avoid awkward construction. Actually, the tendency toward being a jerk is probably gender neutral, but I am not going to get into that!

In a high percentage of the cases, the individual will honestly not believe he is a jerk. Reason: this person knows why he is acting the way he is and believes it is the right thing to do in every case. If he believed something else was right, he would do that. In other words, our friend on the low end of the scale would be deceiving himself that he is not a jerk when he actually is one according to other people.

If a person was at the extreme left on the jerk scale, then he might have a clue that he is really rubbing people the wrong way most of the time. He would know that because of the body language and feedback he gets from others. That still does not stop him from being a jerk; it just means that he knows about it.

Now comes the fun part. We add the element of time. Since we can act like a saint one moment and a devil the next, we may be perceived by others as being a jerk sometimes and not other times. Of course, we normally do not know the difference between these two states, so we figure we are basically OK most of the time. Behind our back, people talk about our "problems" and the fact that very often we act like a jerk. What a conundrum. How can we find out when we are acting like jerks? (Ironically, only those people who aren't jerks would care!)

Enter Emotional Intelligence (EI). The essence of EI is that people who have high levels of this trait have the ability to see themselves more accurately. These individuals have a special mirror that lets them view their own behaviors as others do. In other words, people with high Emotional Intelligence may act like jerks for some small percentage of the time, but they have the perception to know they are doing it. People with low EI have a huge blind spot and cannot detect when they are acting poorly.

This phenomenon is most easy to see in organizations at the leadership or management levels. Leaders with low Emotional Intelligence believe people are responding to them in a different way from what is actually happening - hence the blind spot. So, one cure for the conundrum is to get a higher level of Emotional Intelligence to eliminate the blind spot. Can you buy that stuff at a drug store? No! So how can you get higher EI?

In my leadership classes, students often ask if EI is basically inherited or if it can be learned. I say EI most definitely can be learned. Why? Well, because teaching EI is my occupation: I see significant results when helping leaders gain higher levels of Emotional Intelligence through training and coaching. One thing anyone can do is read about the science of Emotional Intelligence. Start with *Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman. Another highly effective way to gain EI is to obtain a great mentor who is really high on the scale of Emotional Intelligence and is willing to pass on to you what it means and how to interpret the signals coming to you from other people.

Higher EI would mean you become more adept at reading body language and become more openly curious about how people are really reacting to the things you say and do. It would mean building trusting relationships with many people who will do you the great kindness of telling you when you are acting like a jerk. The only way to get people to do that is to reward them when they are honest enough to reflect what you are really doing at any given moment (good or bad). These trusted friends can save you from having a blind spot about your own behavior, which automatically increases your EI. Collectively, they form the surface of the mirror that allows you to see yourself as others do. From that point on, you might still be a jerk for some part of the time, but at least you will know it.

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