

Thinking Out Loud - When a label becomes a stigma

We tend to use labels to define someone or their behaviour. It may not be intended unkindly, but it can have damaging consequences.

In recent weeks we've learned of the brutal abduction and murder of a woman in London, and the conviction of two rapists in Pakistan. Early on in both investigations questions were raised about why the victims put themselves in a vulnerable situation.

"Victim blaming" was the outcry, and rightly so.

The same seems likely to be a feature of the Defence of the Minneapolis police officer accused of the murder of George Floyd. The victim's history of drug use and previous altercations with the police will be turned into an argument that he brought his death upon himself.

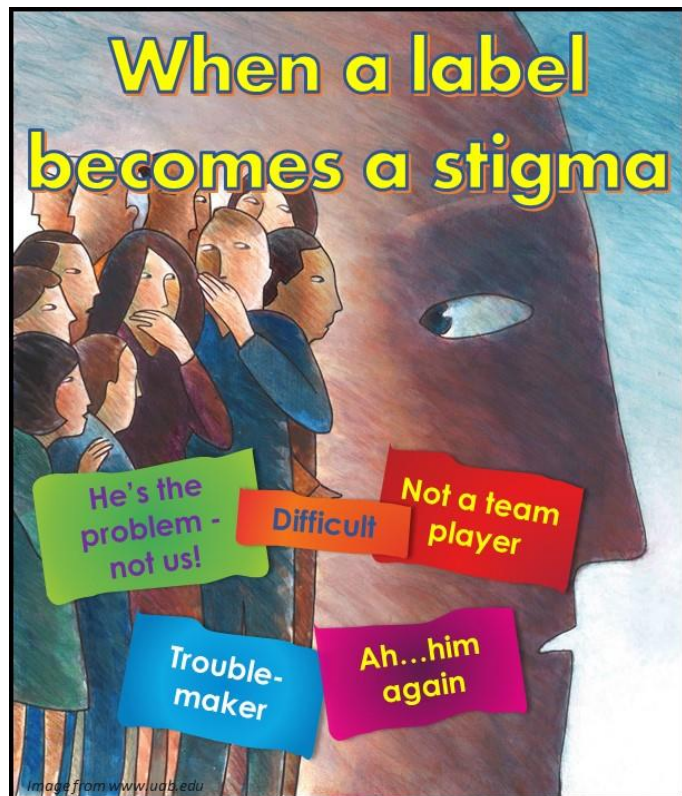
In such dramatic circumstances, it's easy to see the adverse impact of characterising someone in a particular way. Unfortunately, this can also happen in a company's Human Resources Department, or even the Boardroom.

By labelling someone struggling to fit in as "difficult", or "not meeting expectations", the company transfers the blame solely to the individual. In the process, the company absolves itself of any question that it might have contributed to the situation. That's good for maintaining the status quo, but it opens the door to harassment, bullying and the emergence of a toxic culture.

This appears to have happened at Sellafield, the largest single industrial complex in the UK and the largest nuclear facility in Western Europe. Sellafield has some 10,000 direct employees and several thousand more employed through contractors.

As the BBC has reported, one former consultant at Sellafield described the environment as: "a nuclear site, where many employees are demoralised, bullied and scared to speak out. You've got toxic materials and a toxic culture. If you put those two together then you've got a recipe for disaster".

The consultant was terminated shortly after submitting a report criticising the Human Resources Department, and is now claiming dismissal for whistleblowing. Sellafield is



contesting the allegations, and has denied any cover-up, but it has acknowledged concerns about harassment and bullying, which it is confronting via a company-wide improvement programme.

The BBC story lists a catalogue of sexual harassment, racism and fear of reprisals for raising issues. However, as Sellafield is the prominent employer in the area, there is a climate of disquiet but little in the way of organised push back from the staff. There is a fear that complaint could lead to being ear-marked for dismissal. One senior manager is quoted as saying: "The best thing for most people is not to rock the boat, to keep their heads down and just put up with it."

One of the features of the story is how labelling became a weapon to stigmatise the target:

- An autistic employee was described a "mong";
- Muslim employees were characterised by a training instructor as "bearded men in flip-flops", who represent a threat;
- Racist, sexist and homophobic highlighting and bullying were described as routine;
- Questions to a female employee that suggested she had used sexual favours to win a promotion.

There is clearly a toxic culture at Sellafield and one which will not get fixed overnight without being tackled head-on, and in a completely open, transparent manner. There will be fall-out, certainly in human terms.

Closer to home, we may not have nuclear issues to concern us, but we do need to be aware of the danger of applying labels to people.

A decade ago we were less sensitive to questions of diversity and gender, and it was tough for a female to break into senior management ranks. Resistance from senior males in the organisation was often associated with labelling the female colleague.

Gender identification of the "weaker" sex suggested an inability to endure the rough and tumble of the men's locker-room environment of the C-suite. That was not uncommon. But, if the female colleague was single, and she had ideas for change, the gender label could be twisted into a stigma.

Describing the female colleague as "a spinster of a certain age" provided ammunition to discredit her arguments, without them even being discussed.

That may be less likely today, but the move for more diversified Boardrooms is not without its problems. We can train people from different backgrounds on the duties and responsibilities of being a company director. We can label them "Board ready" as if they were a product to be plucked from a supermarket shelf. But board ready and oven ready is not the same thing, and a human factor can kick in.

Finding one's self in a position you've been trained for, but had not imagined or mentally prepared for, can be very challenging. Timid souls by nature, brought up to be deferential to titles or authority, may well be out of their element. A boardroom table populated by

Tan Sri or two, with a glittering record of service and achievement, can be a very intimidating place. Executive directors, with years of service and market knowledge can induce great uncertainty. The human response is defensive: "Keep your head down and don't say too much. It will pass, confidence will grow."

When it doesn't, we have a label: "Imposter syndrome". It's the self-doubt in your own abilities and talent, and an overwhelming sense that you don't really belong, that you're a fraud waiting to be found out.

The problem is that the label implies a mental disorder on top of being a fake or a phoney. The label becomes a stigma.

If a Board colleague uses the label in a mistaken attempt to encourage you to feel better about yourself ("It's just imposter syndrome. You'll get over it."), that can make matters worse.

The encouragement best given to yourself: "You're not there because you're like everyone else; it's precisely because you aren't like everyone else."

As for a colleague, pray for one who says: "I know we can be a pretty scary bunch, but don't let that put you off. We invited you to join us because you have knowledge and experience we don't have. Please feel free to share that with us; we need the insights it will provide".

Labels do not define. They should not be allowed to stigmatise.

David W Berry

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(David Berry is the Managing Director of Fidelius Sdn Bhd and the Deputy President of the Malaysian Institute of Corporate Governance. The views expressed in this article are his own.)