

Productivity Killers: Ontological Arrogance

By Fred Kofman

Michelle won't eat broccoli. She claims "it's yuck." Marcelo refuses to discuss an issue with Gustavo. He claims "Gustavo's an idiot". Michelle, my five year old daughter, and Marcelo, my 45 year old client, do not seem so different. But Marcelo's behavior, as the marketing manager for Latin America of a well-known multinational, has a lot more serious consequences. Gustavo is in charge of the company's most important line of products for the region. If Marcelo acts unilaterally, he will cause a disaster. Not only will he create operative problems; he will also jeopardize the relations between his function and Gustavo's division.

Michelle and Marcelo have the same illness: ontological arrogance; that is, the belief that personal experience defines reality. The ontologically arrogant person thinks, "I see things the way they are." Therefore, "if somebody thinks differently, they're wrong." Marcelo calls Gustavo an "idiot" because Gustavo sees things differently. Like every victim of the ontological arrogance 'virus,' Marcelo believes he is the key holder of the truth. He believes his opinions reflect 'the' truth rather than 'his' (version of the) truth.

Jean Piaget, the famous cognitive psychologist, performed a fascinating experiment with children. He gave a child a cube colored half in red and half in green, and let the child get acquainted with it. Then he sat opposite the child and, holding the cube in his hand, asked him, "What color do you see?" The child correctly responded, "Green." His following question was, "What color do you think I see?" Children aged four or five unhesitatingly responded, "Green." But Piaget discovered that between ages six and eight, children developed the cognitive capacity to adopt a different perspective than their own. In my experience, many executives, rather than being 45 years old, are more like 5 year olds with 40 years of experience.

"The customer is a sponger," "The IT people are a pain," are some phrases that reflect ontological arrogance

within organizations. These phrases and, especially, their underlying ideology, preclude any productive dialogue. Arrogance generates conflicts and lack of communication, harming the effectiveness of the task at hand as well as work relations.

Since it is impossible to operate without opinions, what is the alternative? How do we express an opinion without arrogance? The key is adopting a humble attitude, and accepting that our perspective is not the only possible one. Our opinions reflect our personal reaction to facts rather than the facts themselves. Our reaction is conditioned by our access to information, our interests and needs. If other people are otherwise informed, or have different needs or interests, it follows that their opinions will be different –even regarding the same facts.

The language of ontological humbleness is based on the appropriation of our opinions and the consideration of the opinions of others. In order to establish a dialogue of mutual acceptance and respect, we must not only learn to express our opinion, but also the thought process behind it and its consequences. Similarly, we must learn to inquire about the thought process behind the other person's opinion and the recommendations derived from it. These are fundamental competencies that most professionals fail to acquire.

A person's maturity is reflected by his or her capacity to integrate different perspectives. To achieve this, we must overcome our attachment to our own perspective and accept foreign perspectives. Dialogue is richer and more productive when all opinions are considered; that is, when no single opinion is presented as the only truth. The problem is that the greater permission people have to speak their minds, the greater the diversity of opinions is, and the more conflicts arise. Thus, it is fundamental to learn how to deal with this kind of conflict productively and respectfully. This, precisely, will be the topic of the next article.