

INSPIRE

On Leadership

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Are You More Special Than Those Around You?

An excerpt from *Live As A Leader: Tools and Inspiration to Transform Yourself, Your Team, and Your Life*, by Aleta Norris, Nancy Lewis and John Rutkiewicz, 2022

In our own lives, we recognize how a variety of complex factors shape our actions. We know, for example, if we showed up late for an appointment what our reason is. If someone else were late, we might assume it's because they can't stick to a schedule, they're lazy, or they don't view timeliness as a priority.

In psychology, this is called the Fundamental Attribution Error. This means that for ourselves, we can identify the situations and environmental conditions that went into shaping our actions. But in others, we only see the surface, so we don't stop to think about everything they may be struggling with, thinking about, or facing. No one holds a sign around their neck that says, "I'm worried about my mother's health while she gets medical tests today, and that's why I seem distant at today's meeting. Or, 'I have a special needs child, and that is what makes my schedule less predictable than others.'" Seeing someone check out at a meeting, we may think they're disengaged or just don't care about this project. Or working with someone who requires more flexibility in their schedule may feel unfair unless you realize the unseen challenges.

It takes time and effort to get at the true motivations of others. But like peeling an onion, there are always more layers than what you see on the surface.

One way to begin softening our very-human tendency toward Fundamental Attribution Error is a practice called sonder. You can practice right now, especially if you are in public. The idea of sonder

refers to the profound feeling of realizing that everyone, including strangers you pass on the street, has a life as rich and complex as your own. Practice sonder on the street, the train, a coffee shop or anywhere people are around.

Look at the people surrounding you right now or think about the people you saw on the street today or in the restaurant at lunch. Realize that they all have lived rich and full lives just like you, full of hardships and pain, hopes and dreams, love and heartbreak, with boring, mundane tasks and moments of pure joy. They all have perspectives on life and belief systems and goals for the future.

Now, you could pick any one of those people and, through sonder, imagine what their story is like. The point of sonder is not to be correct in our imagination but to open ourselves up to the realization that rich and complex possibilities exist in the lives of everyone we meet.

The same is true for the people you lead. Remember that we can see below the surface of our own actions, but we don't automatically think about the backstories that drive and shape the lives and actions of other people, including our employees. It takes an extra effort to see what's driving their attitudes, beliefs and actions. For leaders, it's necessary to take an additional step and learn about the deeper motivations of your team.

Aleta Norris provides an ongoing column on developing better leadership skills. She is a leadership expert and Principal at Living as a Leader LLC.

