

INSPIRE

On Leadership

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Practice Sonder on the Street

In our own lives, we recognize how a variety of complex factors shape our actions. We know if we showed up late for an appointment, it could be because one of the kids needed something right before we walked out the door, or we hit traffic when a car accident closed down the freeway. But as we observe others, we only know what we see on the surface, and we make assumptions. If you were late, I might assume that it's because you can't stick to a schedule, you're lazy, or you don't view timeliness as a priority.

In psychology, this is called the Fundamental Attribution Error. This means that for ourselves, we ascribe all the situations and environmental conditions that we know 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.

One way to begin softening our very-human tendency toward Fundamental Attribution Error is a practice called sonder. 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. 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.

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. This helps us see the people around us as people, not as objects.

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