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This was a mistake! What have I done?

The human psyche is a rather remarkable device/phenomenon. Perhaps, the most remarkable talent is its ability to adapt. It is the ability to adapt that explains why human beings are at the top of the food chain. Our brains evolved to adapt faster and more conclusively than any other animal lineage. This capacity to adapt rapidly created an evolutionary advantage, but with all advantages come disadvantages.

Our ability to adapt to changing environments allowed human beings to colonize every part of the Earth's surface, except for the Antarctica. Sometimes, however, we can be too adaptable. Being too adaptable means that we can adjust, or rather we believe that we can adjust to any circumstance. This leaves us vulnerable to self-delusion. Believing that you can adjust to any circumstance, for instance working with any partner is misguided.

While certain business arrangements can be advantageous on paper, they can also be disastrous on a personal level. For example, two young dentists meet in dental school, strike up a friendship and decide to go into business together. Based on the camaraderie of their school days, their assumption that they can work together in business is at best 50-50. Real life brings out the best and the worst in our personalities, as well as our talents. In school, we can fantasize about ourselves, but the reality of business speaks the truth. The truth has a 50-50 chance of being right and beneficial for all parties.

Another example might be a partnership created when a young dentist buys into an existing practice. Having perhaps worked with the senior partner as an associate or buying in as an equal partner, one harbors certain expectations. These expectations concern how others will treat the new partner, as well as how the new partner will treat others. This can be a real wake-up call if both partners are not emotionally secure and experienced enough to adapt to a changing environment. New business decisions can lead the individuals involved to believe they have the powers of adaptation that do not exist. In one's fantasy, it is easy for one to believe that they are powerful, decisive, and fully adaptable to any circumstance. The reality of a new partnership will run both partners through a hard-core reality check.

The truth be told, we are simply not as adaptable with other people as we are with stable environments. This is because the natural environment doesn't change on a daily basis, but only over time. This

relatively stable allows the brain plenty of time to figure out new ways of restructuring the reality of the new environment so that it can successfully survive. The advantage of a stable environment is not conveyed upon competing personalities within a new business partnership.

Everyone's personality reflects the cumulative experience of interacting with the environment. Unlike interacting with the environment of nature, which is relatively stable, interacting with another person involves dealing with a moving target. The environment of the partnership actually talks back, changes its mind, has its own agenda and even has secrets that are unspoken. The environment of a business partnership is very unstable compared to nature. While a business partnership should be considered a mutually reciprocal relationship, it can only work well with certain personalities, and doesn't work very well with certain other personalities.

For example, we can talk about a younger dentist joining an existing practice and buying into the practice. From a business perspective, the new dentists would be entitled to 50% of the profit in return for accepting 50% of the staffing responsibility and 50% of the clinical liability. What's the problem? On paper, this arrangement makes perfect sense, business sense. For a scientist, the sense of business and logic connect nicely. But I would propose that there is another component that is missing from this far too optimistic assessment.

What if the new dentist is by nature particularly insecure about their place in the world and has embraced the profession of dentistry to make up for the deeper inner sense of inadequacy that he feels in his heart. Or what if the senior partner harbors some deep insecurities that might be discovered or tested by the gung ho "I'm going to save humankind" younger dentist. Suddenly, the inability to adapt to changing personalities creates a dramatic challenge to everyone's fantasize self-image.

I do not intend to solve this problem in this column. I would, however, like to make you aware that believing you are adaptable to competing personalities is not something one should take for granted. If you overestimate your abilities to get along with people, you will find yourself in a business arrangement that actually becomes a major source of daily stress, and you will not know it, because the psyche will protect itself from that realization.

The unconscious stress comes about because you misjudged your ability to adapt to your partner's personality or your new partner was unaware of his inability to adapt to your personality. This inequity between your self-image and your actual external image evolves into an unconscious state of conflict. This unconscious state of conflict can endure for years without the parties making the connection that their partner is the source of their stress and daily sense of dread. They act professional and respectful to each other and believe that the money is enough.

It is important to recognize that you create the office environment that you want to work in by the choices that you make. While you may believe that your choices are guided by rationality and good business sense, they are really guided by your emotional history: the cumulative ability to feel good or to feel bad in the world. Thus, most partnerships either break up after five years or live on in bitterness, because of the dentists' expectations. What you expect to feel every day when you go to work is

something you can control. It actually has very little to do with your adaptability and everything to do with the choices you make regarding how you want to feel every day of your life.