A person with long hair

Description automatically generated with low confidence

How and Why We Label Others (and How To Stop)

August 3, 2021

Well, hello Friends! I hope you guys had an amazing week.

Today, I want to talk about LABELS because it holds so many of us back in our careers and lives.

So, let’s start by discussing the definition of labeling.

For psychologists, labeling is defined as a way of compartmentalizing people based on attributes, situations, or behaviors. This happens in families, groups, and society as a whole.

As humans, our need to label runs deep.

It goes back to our primitive or reptilian brain, the part of our brain that’s evolved over the Millenia. The part that’s responsible for self-preservation.

So, for our caveman ancestors, this ability to quickly sort people and situations into categories was super helpful.

Lion equals danger.

Member of opposing tribe equals caution.

It helped them avoid danger and gave them a sense of control because the instantaneous labeling of a person or situation gave them a way to predict what MIGHT HAPPEN and specifically, whether it could cause them harm. And once they assigned that label, it helped them categorize similar future things in the same way. Thereby preserving their safety and ensuring survival of the species.

Psychologists say that our tendency to label begins in infancy and continues as we grow and develop.

So, it’s programmed in. A product of our environment, family, friends, schooling, socio-economic status, societal views and more.

But unlike our caveman ancestors, this primal need to ‘label’ is not so helpful to modern man because it causes us to make SNAP JUDGMENTS that don’t always serve us or others.

Yet we do it all the time.

That driver who cut you off in traffic on the way to work, you might label a ‘bad driver.’

That colleague who’s always up on and sharing the latest rumors, you might label ‘toxic.’

That boss who’s constantly changing their mind, you might label a ‘bad manager.’

Labeling is an extreme form of all or nothing thinking. Because when we assign labels, we’re over simplifying. That person or experience is either THIS or THAT. When in reality, it’s usually BOTH or MANY things.

And when we try to oversimplify people or situations, we limit them. This can have harmful side effects for ourself AND for the person we’re judging.

When we label others, we close ourselves off to ALL that someone ACTUALLY IS by narrowing in on only ONE aspect of who they are based on a specific situation we’ve experienced or behavior we’ve seen them do.

And the risk is that once we label that person, we DO NOT ALLOW ourselves to see anything else about them, when in fact there is ALWAYS MUCH MORE, we could discover about them if we were open to it.

There’s ALWAYS MUCH MORE COMMON GROUND we could find if we looked for it. If we avoided assigning the limiting label to that person and instead allowed ourselves to discover who they are in the FULLEST context.

So, when we label, we close ourselves off to other possibilities. Because we convince ourselves that the label is all a person IS or will EVER BE.

So, let’s say you labeled someone based on a bad experience you had with them.

When you believe that label is TRUE, you close yourself off to believing that maybe that bad experience was just a single event. You also close yourself off to the possibility that there were other factors that contributed to how that person showed up within that experience. Factors you’re NOT aware of.

A bad experience or an unfortunate characteristic you see about someone is not EVERYTHING that person is.

So, labels create an artificially fixed view of A SINGLE aspect of someone when the reality is, that person is not only MUCH more than that one single aspect, but they are also NOT FIXED. Meaning, as humans, we all have a beautiful ability to grow and develop.

Think about someone in your career or life that you’ve had a bad experience with.

What was the experience that happened?

How did you label them?

Do you believe that’s ALL they are?

Do you believe that’s how EVERYONE who interacts with that person SEES them?

Or is it possible that your label for them is faulty or one dimensional?

Labels are limiting because for most of us, once the label is assigned, we close ourselves off to the possibility that the person could possibly NOT be that label we think they are.

That maybe we misjudged them.

Or formed a belief about them based on our own biases or faulty perceptions.

Sometimes we label others because it makes us feel superior.

Sometimes we do it because it makes it easier for us to DEAL with something “bad” that happened to us and making it the fault of the “bad person” who did it.

That feels easier than dealing with the truth, which is that in life, sometimes bad stuff happens.

That means we don’t always have to look for the guilty party.

Sometimes we just need to accept that people make mistakes or that maybe they had an off day.

Or that life is 50% good and 50% bad and that sometimes, bad, or unwanted experiences just happen. And it’s no one’s fault.

But for most of us, that ambiguity feels harder to accept or deal with. It feels BETTER to blame or label or make someone else responsible for it.

But here are some important truths to remember.

1. Life is a balance of highs and lows, good and bad. Your career is the same. Learning how to accept the lows without having to make someone responsible for them frees us up to learn the lessons that the unfortunate experience can deliver. It’s through the downside of life that real growth and character development comes from.
2. People are a mix of strengths and weaknesses. We all have positive and negative character attributes. That applies to your boss. Your co-workers. Your friends. Your family. And YOU. No one is all bad or all good. We’re a messy mix of things. And when we accept that, we allow ourselves to see others AND OURSELVES with curiosity and compassion instead of negativity and judgment.
3. An experience with someone ALWAYS has more sides or dimension than what you’re able to observe on your own. And when we stay open to the fact that what we THINK we see is not actually EVERYTHING that is going on, we become more open to the viewpoints and perspectives of others.

So labeling is something that helps us FEEL better because it falsely oversimplifies the complexity of what it means to be a human having a human experience.

To live in a world full of different viewpoints, perspectives, cultures, needs.

And where sometimes things will go our way and sometimes, they don’t.

At the deepest level, the problem with the rush to judgment of labeling is that it keeps us apart from each other instead of encouraging us to look for common ground or possibilities for connection.

According to Benjamin Whorf, who came up with the linguist relativity hypothesis in the 1930’s, “the words we use to describe what we see aren’t just idle placeholders; they in fact determine WHAT WE SEE.”

So, the labels we assign limit our ability to see beyond them.

In the work context when we label a colleague based on a single bad experience, we risk minimizing or overlooking the role WE PLAYED in the unfortunate interaction. And we don’t stay open to being curious about the other person and why they may have showed up in that way.

As a manager, when we label our team members based on weaknesses we see, we limit their possibilities and potential. And we make it harder for them to fully bring their strengths to bear.

Labels are black and white, but the world is more complicated than that.

And it’s important to remember that people are much more than a single label. Each of us is the sum of our personality traits, experiences, character, and qualities that come together to form a one-of-a-kind person.

So, if the need to label is literally wired into the impulsive part of our brain, how do we avoid doing it?

1. **It starts with self-awareness.**

Become aware of the words you use to judge situations, people, and experiences.

Look for a tendency to blame others for the outcomes of things that have happened to you.

Listen to how you place limits on the capabilities or character of others.

1. **Challenge your perceptions**.

How might you be wrong about your snap judgment?

By assigning that snap judgment, how might it harm that other person?

1. **Shift your thinking (so it drives a different action and a different outcome).**

Choose something new you want to think about that situation, person, or experience.

Actively look for the bigger lessons in the challenges of life (instead of placing blame).

Decide to broaden your view of others so you proactively LOOK for their positive qualities.

Bottom line, labels hurt. They hold people back, keep people small, close them off from opportunities.

And the things other people say about us or that we say about others, can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

If someone is told they’re not smart and they believe they’re not smart, they’ll take the actions that reflect them as not being smart. Like they won’t go above and beyond, or they won’t pursue the college degree or whatever. When, their actions that reflect them as not being smart are really just the result of feeling dumb or unmotivated or whatever, which was caused by them thinking over and over again that they’re not smart.

Words matter.

What you say and think about others matters.

We all deserve to be seen and recognized for EVERYTHING we are.

So, whether you’re a senior executive who leads and entire function, a manager who leads a team or an individual contributor, we all play a role in making the places we work a healthy and encouraging environment.

When we realize that we can overcome our brain’s need to categorize or label by becoming more intentional about how we choose to think about people, situations, and experiences, we’re not only opening and enriching our own life but the lives of others as well.

And that is what I wish for all of us.

Until next time, make it a great week my friends.