



Ostrich Syndrome

Most people don't pay much attention to ostriches.

Think about it. What would you mention first if pushed for a descriptor? Maybe you would list the long legs, extended neck, or feathers.

Nah, probably not. Without question, the thing about these weird creatures that people invariably point out is the image of them sticking their heads in the sand. (*You see it too, don't you?*)

Head in the sand...oh, if only that were a practice reserved for the wild. Unfortunately, in far too many offices, the "ostrich syndrome" can be observed on a daily basis.

Join me for this month's edition of **EA Insights** as we journey into the wild...the wild of the workplace, that is. We will see, in the natural office habitat, what happens when one species of the human ostrich genus -- better known as the "supervisor" -- does a little head burying.

Keep reading. And, if you are a supervisor, be sure to lift your head!

All the best,

June

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When Supervisors Don't Confront

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Ostriches are not only creatures that are found in the wild. Believe it or not, there's a species of ostrich present in offices near and far. Indeed, the "supervisor" -- a member of the human ostrich genus -- is alive and well and prevalent among us.



You see, when supervisors fail to perform or conduct that's unproductive, or downright contrary, they exhibit behavior akin to that of the ostrich. There they stand or sit, head in sand. See nothing. Say nothing.

Indeed, making a beeline to that nestling in the sand may seem the safest move when things go south on a team or with a certain person. However, in these instances, just the opposite usually is the case. Let me offer five likely consequences to consider if you, or someone you know, is a supervisor who sticks his or her head in the sand and fails to confront.

Work doesn't get done.

When there's a productivity problem on the team...for whatever reason...and the team leader doesn't do everything in his or her power to get to the bottom of it, the work that's assigned to the team does not get done, plain and simple. And, when something *is* produced, it's likely to occur with a negative impact on cost, quality, or goodwill.

Folks sometimes forget that, at the heart of the supervisor role, is taking responsibility for a group of people who are put in place to accomplish specific functions. But, if the supervisor's head is in the sand concerning the manner in which people are performing their work -- how they tackle tasks, comply with office policy, or collaborate with colleagues -- without a doubt, there's an effect on the output of the unit and beyond. And, that impact is unlikely to be a good one.

Good performers become disillusioned.

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"Quotes"

"He behaved like an ostrich and put his head in the sand[.]"
~George Carman

"You can do one of two things. You can bury your head in the sand...[o]r you can use all the things you have...and do something different."
~Cat Deeley

"In boxing, they say it's the punch you don't see coming that knocks you out. In the wider world, the reality we ignore or deny is the one that weakens our most impassioned efforts toward improvement."
~Katherine Dunn

"The productivity of work is not the responsibility of the worker but of the manager."
~Peter Drucker

"It takes many good deeds to build a good reputation, and only one bad one to lose it."
~Benjamin Franklin

"One of the tests of leadership is the ability to recognize a problem before it becomes an emergency."
~Arnold H. Glasow

"A reputation as a hard worker is a good reputation to have."
~Kevin Hart

"I've seen guys sit the whole day doing nothing, and I hate it when people are unproductive."
~Olga Kurylenko

"We don't want to think about [it] in an ideal life; ...we prefer

As I work with organizations, meetings with leaders at all levels of course are on the agenda. Additionally, though, as other staff get to know me and feel comfortable just sharing, some very interesting perceptions begin to emerge. Key among them is that, when supervisors ignore bad behavior or poor performance, invariably the consistent producers or the rule observers on the team not only notice; they openly or silently fume.

Now, put HR rules about broadcasting performance management activity aside for the moment. Instead, picture with me a group that has congregated at a cubicle for a half hour-plus of boisterous chatting while the supervisor, who is in office with door open, offers no reminders (after a reasonable time) about acceptable workplace conversation levels or does nothing to encourage the talkative team to return to the tasks at hand. In that instance, you're not seeing sensitivity to HR rules; you're seeing someone hoping and praying that it'll all just go away!

The problem is that other staff members, those trying to focus and work, grow more and more frustrated. And, that frustration plays itself out in resentment toward the passive supervisor who allows it all to go on and/or toward team members who both do little to carry their part the load and who disrupt others in the process. Repeated occurrences may result in an "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" sentiment taking over among formerly hard-working staff, and what started out as a small issue spreads. In other instances, the supervisor's failure sparks a very different HR challenge...not one related to privacy but now to turnover, as the productive staff member's primary aim is moving away from the team or the organization as quickly as possible. And, it all stems from a supervisor who has sidestepped a key responsibility.

Poor performers stay that way.

Sometimes office ostriches actually have good intentions. I've heard folks express a goal to model the kind of performance or conduct they want others to see and emulate. Excellent thought! I, too, generally subscribe to the theory that, at times, more is *caught* than is *taught*.

Unfortunately, the downfall with the "just watch me" approach, devoid of any type of expectation-setting conversation, is that it shifts accountability. This tactic relies on the employee to recognize, on his or her own, that the supervisor is dissatisfied and to pick up (we hope correctly) the cues that are being sent. Is this possible? Certainly. However, such organic behavior change seldom takes place as an epiphany, if at all. Rather, when "expectation catching" does occur, it's likely to be a slow process...all the while fueling the other challenges discussed here.

Team stature diminishes.

Organizations have cultures. So do teams. And, although some aspects of culture remain hidden from view, others are quite clear for all to see and become etched in the minds of onlookers.

A team develops a personality through the good, bad, and ugly. When it consistently under-produces or when its diligent workers openly express frustration, undergo a downward attitude or productivity transformation of their own, or flee in droves, it's seen. These characteristics, even if low-key at the outset, take on a life of their own, especially if repeated. They become the culture of the team, and often of each team member...and an unflattering one at that.

The supervisor suffers.

What most people do not realize is that the supervisor suffers on many fronts from this behavior as well. For instance, the person's internal leadership takes a hit; his or her ability to direct the team -- to act as an effective supervisor of people -- is compromised with each failure to act. It's also disconcerting for the supervisor whose team is perpetually under-performing or has a toxic culture; the pressure weighs, and work just is not a pleasant place to be for that team leader. His or her confidence may erode; uncertainly mounts for the leader whether a point of no return has been reached such that no one would listen if or when he or she actually got the gumption to say something down the line. Lastly, the supervisor's reputation is hurt; when a team is not functioning as it should, those in charge naturally look first to the one who is responsible for the group and its efforts. And, with each passing day, that leader's reputation is tarnished a little more.

At face value, the ostrich syndrome may appear to be the simplest or safest way to proceed. However, it carries a range of immediate and/or long-term consequences for supervisors and for those on the team.

So, if you are a supervisor, how comfortable or how adept are you at addressing unproductive conduct or performance? If just reading the question makes you sweat, or if you are competent generally but devoted to ongoing growth, now is the time to lift your head out of the sand. Call on us at **Executive Advantage**. We're here to help you gain confidence in this aspect of your leadership so that you and your entire team reap the benefits. [Contact us today](#).



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to adopt the ostrich position."

~John Lanchester

"You can't buy a good reputation; you must earn it."

~Harvey Mackay

"If we sit by and become complacent and put our heads in the sand, we're complicit."

~Shelley Morrison

"I have a very ostrich mentality. I feel like I have my head in the sand so no one can see me."

~Lupita Nyong'o

"True leadership knows not to go to extremes but knows how to confront and appreciate challenges."

~Lubna Olayan

"Don't ignore big problems, and don't try to pretend that problems are smaller than they are."

~Gina Raimondo

"Leadership is not about a title or a designation. It's about impact, influence and inspiration. Impact involves getting results, influence is about spreading the passion you have for your work, and you have to inspire teammates[.]."

~Robin S. Sharma

"I try my best to confront situations because I know, at the end of the day, you can deal with it or it will deal with you. I've had enough experience to know that that's how it goes down. There's no going around it."

~Jada Pinkett Smith