

When to properly apply Hanlon's Razor

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Have you ever been accused of being a bad person? Or accused of doing something wrong on purpose? Unless you really were a bad person or intentionally messed something up, I bet you felt somewhat offended after being told such things. Or perhaps maybe you have occasionally jumped the gun on statements toward someone else in the past. It never feels good to be a victim of a false assumption nor is it very effective to be so assuming of others, especially when you are wrong. Lacking humility in situations with others may lead to gross misjudgment, which in turn can negatively affect relationships and outcomes.

As a leader there will be times when you have to interpret others' actions on a given matter, and getting those interpretations right can make all the difference in the world. When making such interpretations, it would behoove you to apply the principle of Hanlon's Razor.

According to this philosophical razor (rule of thumb), named after American physicist Robert J. Hanlon, it is advisable not to attribute malicious intent to the behaviors of others when those actions can just as adequately be explained by carelessness or ignorance. Sometimes, people just don't know what they don't know and they unknowingly act incorrectly. Until they do know what they should know, don't automatically assume they are acting maliciously.

The idea behind Hanlon's Razor is to encourage us to practice humility and be more cautious in our judgment of others. Unless you know someone has been fully

educated or trained on a matter, you should be willing to give them the benefit of the doubt when misunderstandings arise, as this is often a better approach than immediately assuming malicious intent. Many complications can stem from the assumption of bad intentions: bad morale, ineffective leadership, and poor performance, among others.

Here is an example of how Hanlon's Razor can manifest in the workplace. Whenever there is conflict, there is sometimes a tendency for managers to attribute the mistakes of subordinates to malicious intent and subsequently take corrective action against those subordinates. This can often lead to bad morale. I once issued a letter of reprimand to a member of the military for not being properly prepared for a certain mission. But as it turned out, they were not made aware of their role in the mission in advance. Their actions were not malicious or negligent, they were truly unaware about what was going on--no one properly briefed them. I ended up reversing the admonishment and apologizing for my incorrect assumption. I don't know if I restored the person's faith in my leadership ability, but that's the potential consequence in a leader's lap when taking action against someone on an incorrect assumption.

The application of Hanlon's Razor can be beneficial in various contexts. It encourages us to be more generous to people and assume that a situation might be more complex. Likewise, it urges respectful conversations and more balanced approaches to problem-solving. There are, though, some things you should keep in mind:

While Hanlon's Razor is more positive in tone and disposition, there will be occasions when you should not apply it. It has been criticized by some experts as being too simplistic. Because it implies that possible malicious actions can be explained by sheer ignorance rather than intentional wrongdoing, there are often times when a bad apple gets away with being a bad apple. While it is true that intent can be hard to ascertain, and that incorrect assumptions can lead to serious repercussions, the use of Hanlon's Razor could very well end up excusing those whose intentions were malicious. In essence, it reduces the emphasis and consequence placed on negative behavior that might be intentional.

Therefore, automatically applying Hanlon's Razor may not be the most prudent action. Sweeping one's malicious intent under the rug of ignorance or stupidity in and of itself can be ignorant or stupid. If you do this too many times, you put yourself at risk of sinking in quicksand with a knife in your back. Or someone else will eventually guide you right over a cliff with a smile on their face. And likewise, don't always automatically excuse others for being ignorant or stupid. Sometimes, people should know better because we all know better--and act accordingly! And when they don't, there should be consequences for that as well.

Overall, though, Hanlon's Razor makes initial sense in assessing someone's behavior, but always be ready to pull the plug on it if you believe a person's motives and intentions are bad!

~ The End ~