

If I'm Seeing People as People, Do I Always Have to Help Them?



In Arbinger workshops, participants sometimes ask: If I'm seeing people as people, do I always have to help them?

A common example in such conversations is a homeless person. If we're seeing people as people, does that mean we must give every panhandler money?

In another example, what about an employee who is not meeting standards but wants a raise? Does having an outward mindset mean we should give them the raise?

The answer is no—for two reasons.

Reason 1: "Honor," not "Do"

Arbinger's material has a single moral proposition: *see others as people and honor one's sense or desire toward them*. There is a reason we use the word "honor" rather than "do" or "not do." When we see people as people, we have a sense or desire to be helpful towards them. Sometimes we might act upon that sense and do something helpful; other times we will not.

Perhaps, in the case of the homeless person, we'd like to give them money but do not have any. In other cases, we might not have the means, education, competency, or other tools to do what we sense we could do.

Seeing people as people means staying alive to their personhood regardless of what we can or can't physically do to help them. Regardless of our actions—our behavior—we can *honor* our sense to be helpful if we continue to *want* to be helpful.

Reason 2: What's the Real Need?

Sometimes, what people want is different from what they need. For example, the employee who is not meeting standards might want a raise, but what they need is, potentially, stronger accountability, training, encouragement, or even termination.

If we are operating with an outward mindset, we will not have a desire to do something “nice” that is not, in fact, helpful. Instead, truly caring about the person as a person, we will tell them the hard truths they need to hear. Then we will do what we can to help them improve.

Furthermore, we will respond to others' needs in a manner which accepts the overall organizational mission and considers the others impacted by our decisions and work.

Why Honor Our Sense Toward Others?

Often, Arbinger workshop participants raise this question: What if the person simply refuses to help themselves? Why should I honor my sense or desire toward them?

What if, for example, the homeless person does not try to save money, get a job, etc.? What if the employee does not try to improve?

Here's the thing: If we do not honor our sense or desire

toward another person, we disregard not only *their* humanity, but also our own. We put our own humanity onto a dangerous slide.

Our humanity is intimately bound up with our capacity to sense something of others' needs and feelings. That is why we call it *self-betrayal* when we choose not to honor our sense or desire toward others.

In the moment of self-betrayal—when we choose not to honor our sense toward another person—we must justify that choice. We find justification by focusing on others' faults, real and imagined. We take up a self-justifying and others-blaming narrative. We value other people's failures because they give us an excuse for why we shouldn't have to help them.

And in so doing, we barter our humanity away. We are no longer alive to others' needs and feelings; we also lose connection to ourselves. We become hardened. We trade our humanity for a "safety blanket" of justification.

What's the Alternative?

If we honor our sense toward others, we remain connected. We start to see people where we previously saw justifications. This can be disconcerting at first, as we encounter a world filled with actual people whom we previously ignored, stepped over, or smashed, but who now call forth a strange sense of responsibility.

It is also exciting. In this brave new world, connected to others and ourselves, we begin to see possibilities we were blind to before. We might find ways out of longstanding conflicts. We might identify new ways we could help—truly help—that homeless person or that employee. And, most importantly, we retain our own humanity.