

# Who Are These People?

By Joe Whitefield

**H**ere are two questions worthy of your consideration: 1) are you engaged in any professional or personal relationships that are frustrating or challenging? 2) If so, do you view the people in these relationships as objects or people? Don't answer yet; just think about it.

I was confronted with these questions recently as part of a leadership session at APPA's Senior Facilities Officer Summit. The session was based on the book *Leadership and Self-Deception* by the Arbinger Institute. My initial response was that of course I have some challenging relationships, and that I think of all people as people, not objects. However, the more I learned about the second question, the less confident I became of my answer. Before you answer for yourself, let's explore the topic a little.

## PEOPLE AS OBJECTS

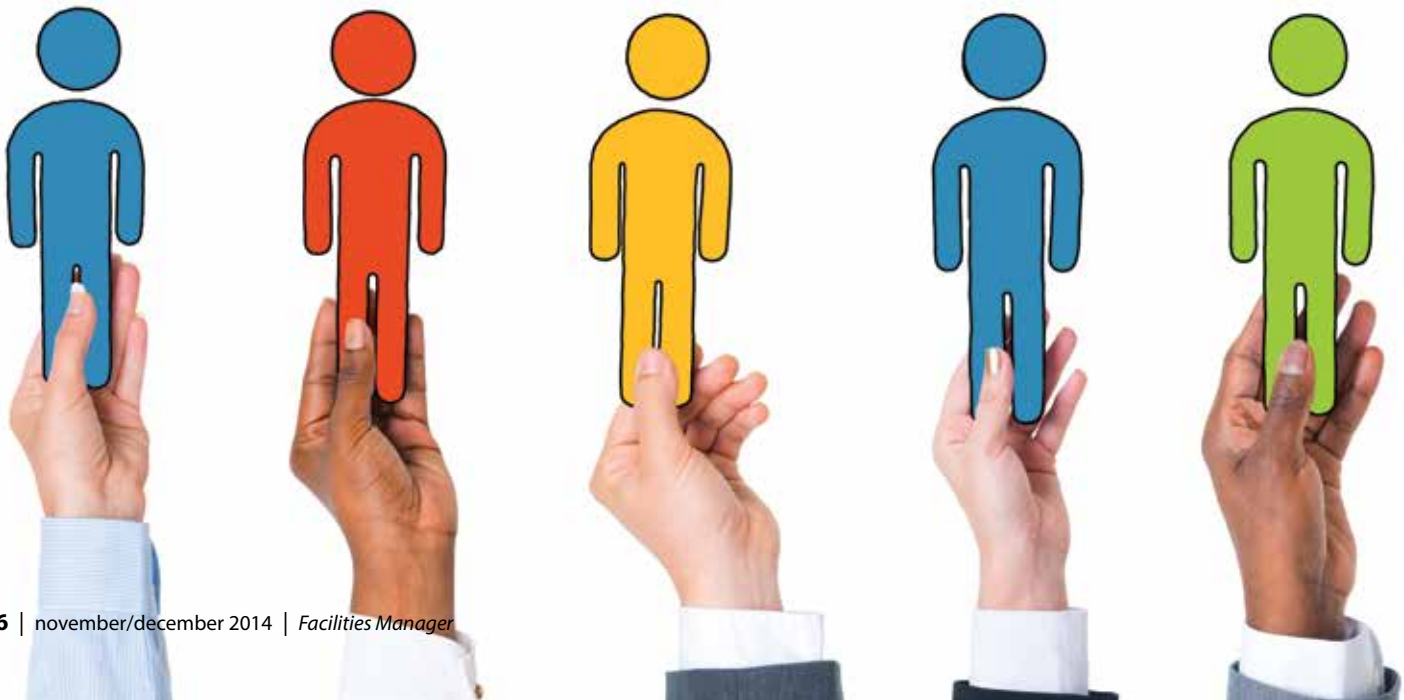
Chairs are objects. They have many uses. You can sit on them, sometimes stand on them (not advised), and so on. In each case the chair serves a specific purpose or need that we may have. Basically they can be **tools**. In some cases chairs can also be **obstacles** if they are setting in our way, impeding our movement in a space. Finally they can simply be **irrelevant**—present, but neither useful nor specifically in the way.

To think of a person as an object is simply to think of him or her as either a tool (to be used to meet an objective of yours), an obstacle (impeding the accomplishment of an objective of yours), or irrelevant. The book refers to thinking of people this way as “being in the box.”

## PEOPLE AS PEOPLE

People are people. They have needs, desires, schedules, objectives, and agendas. Seeing others as people basically means that we recognize they are responding to the situations and motivations in their lives just as we do. This is being “out of the box.” Using this perspective is profoundly important—as challenging as it may be with certain people. So ask yourself; do others count as much as you count?

Think of the person on the road, bypassing the patient drivers, who wants to cut in front of you just as his lane ends. How do you view that driver? As a person or object? He is certainly impeding your progress. Whether you let him in or not, he is still a person who is trying to get somewhere. The fact that you are on the same road, going the same direc-



tion, at the same time suggests you have some things in common. Now you have two decisions to make; will you let him in (behavioral) and will you consider him as a person or object (paradigm).

It turns out this simple consideration of others as people is the key to healthier, more productive relationships. It affects our behaviors toward others and, equally if not more importantly, it affects the receptivity of our behaviors by others. We know when people are faking it with us. It is hard to do our best work when we feel underappreciated or are suspicious of the other person's motives. No matter how much they smile and nod, when we sense that we are just an object to them the work, and intended results, suffer. And if we can recognize this in others, you must know they can recognize the same in us.

Not surprisingly, when one person views the other as an object, it often results in a reciprocating view by the other person. The health and effectiveness of this type of relationship can be described in varying degrees of mediocre, poor, or toxic.

#### RESETTING RELATIONSHIPS

So, let's assume you have at least one relationship that could be better. What do you do? Maybe you've tried to be nicer, more attentive, a better listener. As good as those efforts are, they are still behavioral changes. Behavioral changes can fall flat, or invite counterproductive responses when they are viewed skeptically (because you are still in the box and the other person feels like an object.) Your actions will not be trusted.

To really change the relationship you should start with getting out of the box—seeing the other person as a person. Try to understand his or her needs, motives, and objectives. Look to be as supportive of others as they are to you. Make no mistake, people can have profound differences in convictions, opinions, personalities, and consideration of appropriate behaviors. Seeing another person as a person does not

mean that you have to accept his or her views or compromise yours. It simply means that the other person still counts, and that should be the basis from which behaviors and communications derive. With some persistence and a little luck, they may even reciprocate and get out of the box for you

There is really a lot more to the

discussion than can be presented in this space. So, I recommend you read the book. In the meantime, I have a few relationships to which I need to tend. ☹

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