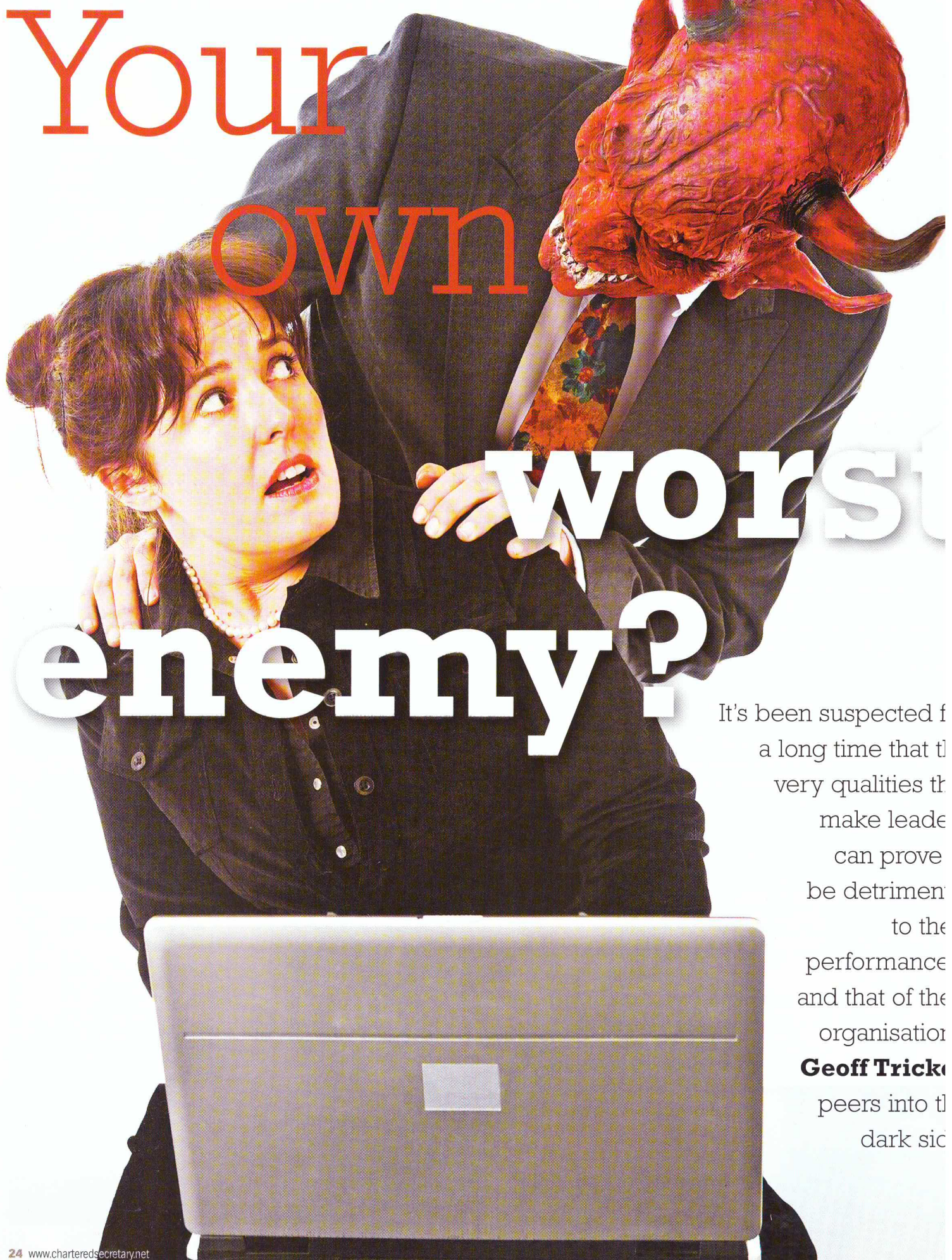


Your own worst enemy?

A woman with dark hair in a bun, wearing a black shirt and a pearl necklace, looks up with a surprised expression at a man. The man is wearing a dark suit and a red bull head mask with large white tusks. He is holding a silver laptop in front of him. The background is plain white.

It's been suspected for a long time that the very qualities that make leaders can prove to be detrimental to the performance and that of the organisation

Geoff Trickett peers into the dark side

In the past decade, we have witnessed an extraordinary pageant of misbehaviour at the top of both corporate and public life. This is the toxic consequence of a failure to restrain the demons within – a struggle that seems to intensify under stress or with personal success. Freud likened the human mind to an iceberg, very little visible above the surface. Behind a surprisingly thin veneer of charm, social and morality – our civil identity – lies a turbulent armoury of primitive instincts, drives and impulses evolved to increase our chances of survival. With the stability and relative tranquility of modern-day civilised life, much of this survival kit is superfluous. However, it is still there and it includes impulses that may be severely attenuated. Amongst the revolutionary developments in personality assessment of recent years, research has focused on this deeper perspective, which we refer to as the 'dark side' of personality. Dark side studies capture the immature forces within a personality that will always threaten to disrupt the peace and integration that we each achieve in our everyday persona. They tap into the primitive instincts described in 'veneer theories' of human nature – theories that view our civilised and restrained behaviour as a façade beneath which our primal heritage still festers.

PRIMAL INSTINCT

In September 2009, PCL released a report, titled *A Decade of the Dark Side*, based on data from a substantial sample of 18,000 leaders and senior managers in the UK collected over the previous 10 years. The focus of the study was on dark side character traits – those deeply-seated and potentially self-destructive aspects of personality that interfere with one's influence and effectiveness (for more on how this is measured see box overleaf). The report looks at the distinguishing characteristics for different industries, compares generations X and Y with baby boomers and highlights distinct differences between public and private sector managers. Headline results are that 29 per cent of the sample showed a dark side that is so dutiful, compliant and appeasing that they are likely to have difficulty in making independent decisions or 'speaking truth to power'; that in 26 per cent of the sample, performance is threatened by being so aloof and hedged that they are reluctant to deal with 'people' issues; and that a further 24 per cent are charming and persuasive, but to such an extent that they are easily seen as manipulative, flattery and disingenuous. Additionally, 85 per cent of the sample displayed 'dark side' characteristics of one kind or other – so it is not even like we are talking

about an insignificant minority of people here.

The interpersonal chemistry of these dispositions is that they all serve in some way to undermine loyalty and erode the commitment of others: a serious issue for anyone trying to build a team or to have personal influence on the corporate culture. These personality gremlins fall into three broad categories. First, there are tendencies that reflect social self-doubt or awkwardness and a reluctance to perform socially

Behind the veneer of social skill lies a turbulent armoury of primitive instincts.

(we call these Moving Away tendencies). Second, there are tendencies concerned with being highly competitive and domineering (we call these Moving Against tendencies). And third, there are tendencies concerned with being acquiescent, anxious to please and to avoid offence (we call these Moving Towards tendencies). These inclinations are a constitutional part of our personality blueprint, the raw material that fuels our drives, and they make us distinctively the individuals that we are. If they are effectively managed, each has its singular benefits and advantages, and offers a route to personal success. However, when we take them to extremes they become annoying to others or worse. Triggered by pressure and stress, or by the excesses of success, they are the one common denominator in leadership derailment.

'Dark side' characteristics of managers can have a profound negative effect on individuals and organisations. It is estimated that about 60 per cent of employees report that their line manager is their greatest source of stress. It is also estimated that of every ten people earmarked for stratospheric career trajectories, seven will fail or derail as leaders, many of them because of a dysfunctional personality style. The pressures at the top mean that the job 'life expectancy' of the average chief executive is now somewhere between 30 and 40 months. Indeed, in the UK in 2000, one in four chief executives of UK businesses with sales of over £500 million left prematurely. Statistics are open to differences in interpretation, but these figures undoubtedly reflect the stresses and excesses that accompany high-profile roles.

No matter how successfully we have controlled our temperament in the past, when we are distracted from paying attention to the way we come across to others, the dark side will elbow its way back to the forefront and threaten to dictate our behaviour. Beyond their peak of manageable pressure, the self-doubting become increasingly brooding, distant and morose, the compliant become submissive and indecisive, and the confident become imperious and overbearing.

Success, too, carries its own particular risks, encouraging excesses that fuel a grandiose sense of indestructibility.

In times of stress, of course, some will be blissfully unaware of their negative impact on others, or of the possibility that they might give offence. Many readers will have their own examples of managers and leaders who are unaware of the dark side of their passion and enthusiasm (volatility), their charm (manipulation) or their focus (passive-aggression). The critical thing is that self-awareness and an accurate appreciation of one's impact on others is what keeps us on track and out of trouble. However, those who remain impervious to feedback

can be in serious danger of sabotaging company success as well as their own careers. A leader embarking on a senior role has to remember that there are many things beyond his or her control that can derail them, the last thing they should do is to add their own blind spots to the list.

Particular hazards may be associated with rapid ascent into positions of power and authority. Our research suggests that talented employees are in danger of becoming less self-aware and restrained as they rise through the hierarchy. They are successful, they are important, they are increasingly powerful and, while some will be humbled and honoured by the experience, others will feel exhilarated, inflated and superior. Like the bubbles in a champagne flute, which appear as insignificant specks at the bottom of the glass and increase in size as they rise through the intoxicating liquid to burst as they hit the surface, egos seem to be similarly vulnerable to organisational altitude. In this regressive process, derailment beckons as previously mastered impulses re-emerge with destructive effect and self-restraint falls away. Paradoxically, the problem for some failed leaders has been the intoxicating effect of success.

KEEPING THE BEAST AT BAY

In spite of the unremitting negativity of the above, there is a very significant positive side to all of this. Whatever our inherent temperament, as *homo sapiens*, we are also equipped to fight for survival with the tools required to succeed. The trouble is that, in relation to the more modest challenges of civilised life and the conventions that normally mediate social interaction, our armoury is seriously overpowered. To ensure success, the dark side needs to be tamed and managed to accommodate the requirements of social and working relationships.

On the journey to maturity, any adult will have mastered, channelled and shaped whatever primitive drives and impulses they arrived with on this planet – their personal genetic endowment and personal survival kit. Their first hurdle in the struggle for survival will have been to ►



A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

THE PRE-EMINENT MEASURE OF 'DARK SIDE' personality is the Hogan Development Survey (HDS). Gillian Hyde and I worked with Bob and Joyce Hogan to develop the UK edition, originally published in 1997. *The Decade of the Dark Side* report celebrated ten years of application in coaching, selection and leadership development. The brief scale descriptions below will provide some insight into the territory covered by the HDS.

The double-barrelled scale names give an indication of both the positive and negative implications for each and underline the crucial point that you can have too much of a good thing.

Enthusiastic/Volatile

Passionate and excitable; difficult to work with if they become moody, irritable and high maintenance. Self critical and easily disappointed by others, they can become emotional or volatile.

Shrewd/Mistrustful

Wary of others and hard to deceive, they are difficult to work with when they become suspicious, mistrustful, sensitive to criticism and suspicious of others' motives.

Careful/Cautious

Unassertive, difficult to work with because they become easily embarrassed, fearful of making mistakes, slow to contribute.

Independent/Detached

Uninvolved and uninterested in office politics, but difficult to work with when they become distant, uncommunicative, hard to reach when under pressure and unaware of their impact on others.

Focused/Passive-aggressive

Organised and consistent, but difficult to work with when they become inflexible, resistant to advice or interruptions, or stubborn and procrastinating.

Confident/Arrogant

Very self-assured, they have a high opinion of themselves and their abilities, difficult to work with when they become arrogant, overbearing and reluctant to listen to alternative view points.

Charming/Manipulative

Risk-taking, carefree and lack guilt, but difficult to work with when their charm and concern for others is seen as exploiting.

Vivacious/Dramatic

Socially skilled and attractive, such people become difficult to work with when they are revealed as superficial, attention seeking, and addicted to the limelight.

Imaginative/Eccentric

'Ideas people' who are uncomfortable to work with when their suggestions become eccentric, impractical or just too numerous.

Diligent/Perfectionistic

Exacting, focused on detail and meticulous, but difficult to work with when they become over-critical of others' work, micromanaging and unable to delegate.

Dutiful/Dependent

Eager to please, accommodating and acquiescent but difficult to work with when they become indecisive, reluctant to make decisions independently or to take the initiative.

achieve attachment, acceptance and nurturance within whatever culture, era, or circumstance they found themselves.

The progress then made from the demanding, self-centred, immediate gratification of infancy to the reciprocation, collaboration and appreciation

of others that characterise adulthood seems, for the most part, to happen intuitively. Personal and vicarious experience and the influence of cultural values mediated through family, education, religion and the media go a long way in turning us into effective grown-ups. Thus far,

personal development will have been largely an unconscious, passive and instinctive process. Arriving at adulthood, we may at first be inclined to feel that the job is now done – effectively, 'it is me, take it or leave it'. In fact, the road to self-actualisation is more demanding than that.

To become effective participants in an adult world, whether consciously or unconsciously, we have had to work at it. We have all had to fashion something out of the temperament with which we were genetically endowed; finding our way through a minefield of manners, protocols, courtesies and other social mores, learning which aspects of our nature we can easily deploy to good effect and which we need to restrain, either to curb excess or to overcome inhibitions or sensitivities. Some people are manifestly more successful in this than others, but everyone can improve their game.

There are many ways in which leaders can be supported in this: in-company development schemes, for example, or coaching. Indeed, tools like the Hogan Development Survey are increasingly being used to help in the identification of coaching goals, and specialise techniques, which reflect the broad model described in this article, can place the development process for the coachee within a coherent, well-informed structure.

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For all the talk about the danger of 'dark side' characteristics, avoidance is generally not a viable solution. Knowing your dark side is liberating, will have been with you from birth and is likely to have been misunderstood and badly managed by others. Facing up to these realities is a part of personal growth and may resolve life-long uncertainties and ambiguities.

The challenge for every individual is to pitch it right, and to allow just enough expression of our instinctive drives to keep us 'in the zone'. For the most part, we are pretty good at it – but to let our primitive urges rip is asking for trouble. Organisations must be aware of the significant dark side influences in their workforce. Coaching and development programmes need to uncover these characteristics and give individuals effective strategies to manage them.

At every level, individuals benefit from awareness of their dark side tendencies and, while often having a fondness for them, need to appreciate their potential to sabotage success. Self-awareness is the key to this process; we need to embrace our dark sides before we can manage them. Familiarity renders them impotent: rather like Dracula, dark side characteristics are defeated when exposed to the daylight.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Geoff Trickey is Managing Director of Psychological Consultancy Limited (PCL). Hard copies of *A Decade of the Dark Side* are available from PCL, and cost £ including p&p. To order a copy, call 01892 559 540.