

HRD

The only independent strategic HR publication

the **HRDIRECTOR**

MARCH 2016 | ISSUE 137

SPECIAL REPORT

CAN NEUROSCIENCE PROVIDE THE INSIGHT INTO HEARTS AND MINDS THAT CONVENTIONAL ENGAGEMENT PATENTLY FAILS TO ATTAIN?

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{ A VISION OF BEAUTY }

“THE DIVERSITY AGENDA WON'T JUST HAPPEN, YOU HAVE TO BE THE CHAMPION OF IT AND KEEP PUSHING AWARENESS”

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PATH TO THE DARK SIDE

Dark side personality characteristics have their roots in successful styles of interaction. They represent strategies of relating to others that are useful to a point – even helping elevate individuals to positions of status – but at their extreme, they become overplayed strengths.



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When asked what makes a successful leader, qualities like integrity, charisma and strong interpersonal skills often top the list. These 'bright side' traits describe how leaders typically behave at their best and are the prime target of most personality assessments used to select and develop executives. But perhaps we should also consider the 'dark side' of personality, or those flawed interpersonal strategies that can cause leaders to derail. Forward-looking organisations are increasingly reflecting on the implications of these traits and how to assess them when selecting, developing and, ultimately, retaining their leaders. Exceptionally confident individuals with high energy may dazzle at interview, but over time have a tendency to overestimate their own talents or ignore their shortcomings. Such dysfunctional tendencies reflect deeply entrenched styles of behaviour. They often emerge during new or stressful situations, or when successful leaders relax impulses they previously kept tightly in check because they no longer have any restraining influences. Therefore, the tipping point for these behaviours are both stress and success.

The issue for organisations and individuals is that, left unmanaged, they undermine loyalty and commitment and have far-reaching consequences. Research suggests that the average failed executive costs organisations around \$2.7 million. As well as the more conspicuous costs like their compensation packages, the hidden costs include lost opportunities, poor public relations and degradation of the brand. Moreover, the adverse consequences are not limited to organisational health. According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, poor management causes more health complaints for individuals than financial concerns and family problems. Organisational culture surveys also reveal that around three-quarters of working adults say their immediate boss is the most stressful aspect of their job.

Recognising the issue then raises the question of how to get to grips with it. Robert and Joyce Hogan, world experts on personality psychology, were the first to publish a taxonomy of the dark side called the *Hogan Development Survey* (HDS). Rather than focusing on leadership talents, it is based on the reasons why leaders often self-destruct. It pinpoints 11 patterns of dysfunctional interpersonal behaviour that erode trust, loyalty and enthusiasm. Whilst everyone scores somewhere on the spectrum of these derailment areas, the behaviours are particularly critical for leadership roles given their potential impact on employee relationships, team performance and organisational effectiveness. The 11 styles of counterproductive behaviour can be grouped into three clusters that characterise the underlying anxiety or insecurity for each specific scale. Each cluster is based on a certain strategy for relating to others:

Managing one's feelings of inadequacy by avoiding contact with others - relates to the Excitable, Sceptical, Cautious, Reserved and Leisurely scales. Managing one's self-doubts by dominating and intimidating others - refers to Bold, Mischievous, Colourful and Imaginative, and managing one's insecurities by building alliances - refers to Diligent and Dutiful. Importantly, while the HDS assesses possible derailing characteristics, these extreme tendencies can be strengths up to a certain point. Some sectors and functions may even benefit from particular dark side tendencies, such as the security services, which might actively seek sceptical, mistrusting types, or the creative industries, which need imaginative individuals to conjure up unusual ideas. However, research from The Center for Creative Leadership found that dark side personality traits can impede a leader's ability to mould a cohesive and positive organisational culture. Studies also suggest that a leader's

personality affects employee morale and when morale is high good business results follow, and the reverse effect also holds true. Developing a leader's weaknesses is therefore as important, if not more so, than purely focusing on their strengths.

Due to its prevalence in leadership roles, the dark side characteristic that has attracted the most research is the 'Bold' scale, which can be viewed as a sub-clinical type of narcissism. It is perhaps unsurprising that narcissists are more likely to emerge as leaders given their desire for status and dominance, together with an unflinching self-confidence. Their tendency to self-promote and hold unwavering opinions, which others often perceive as the archetypal traits of a leader, may help explain the rise to power of individuals like the outspoken U.S. presidential candidate, Donald Trump, or the ill-fated former Royal Bank of Scotland CEO, Sir Fred Goodwin.

As well as helping individuals to emerge as leaders, narcissistic tendencies can have a powerful influence over other organisational outcomes. A study of chief executive officers found that more narcissistic CEOs receive higher total pay (including salary, bonus and long-term incentives), have higher total shareholdings and have bigger discrepancies between their own pay and other team members. But while narcissistic individuals may create a strong first impression and are adept at advancing through organisations, they are frequently difficult to work with. Expecting special treatment, they often ignore their critics and alienate subordinates. Indeed, narcissistic tendencies have been linked to poor performance and negative perceptions of leadership effectiveness since self-enhancement is prioritised over long-term relationships. These findings have important implications for organisations since many selection and development approaches, which are based on subjective assessments and therefore prone to bias, over-cater to narcissists' strengths. While moderate levels of narcissism contribute to leadership effectiveness, beyond a certain point they become detrimental to performance.

Although the effects of narcissism, or being 'Bold', are well reported, each of the dysfunctional tendencies has an impact at its extreme level. The presence of dark side characteristics is an inevitable fact of organisational life and, as highlighted, can be beneficial in certain circumstances. You can't have a creative spark without a sprinkling of eccentricity and self-absorbed vagueness. Equally, there are very few dynamic, optimistic, can-do leaders without a touch of arrogance or occasional bombast. The key for organisations is to know what to look for when selecting leaders. Informing this decision should be an understanding of the kind of culture they want to create. Organisations seeking to shake up the status quo and create a more energetic, innovative culture may want candidates high on the Imaginative scale to redress an existing imbalance. In contrast, those that want to create a more cohesive culture may look for candidates with characteristics that complement others in the leadership team.

Helping leaders already embedded in an organisation to recognise and understand their dark side personality traits is a crucial part of executive development. While people frequently identify with their derailing characteristics, many struggle to let go of them. These traits are cherished because they probably contributed to a leader's current success. Illustrating how the behaviours impact others and therefore their limiting effect on leadership growth is an important aspect of the development strategy. Planting the seed of self-awareness can help individuals to recognise which behaviours represent too much of a good thing. Sceptical types who are clever with office politics and appear savvy, for example, may need to be reminded of their tendency to be over-defensive and paranoid when under pressure. Equally, congenial Dutiful leaders could benefit from understanding the impact of their yay-saying tendencies on their teams, who may feel their views are not being fairly represented. A useful structure for feeding back to leaders on their dark side tendencies is to: raise awareness, challenge individuals' assumptions if they are not self-aware and foster a change in behaviour by identifying personal development objectives. The goal for both leaders and organisations is to rein in the counterproductive behaviours that are driven by dark side tendencies and harness their utility as strengths. ●



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