About Talent Quarterly

Our mission is to make organizations more successful by providing their leaders with the science-based, insightful and practical information to make critical talent decisions. We accomplish that mission by publishing serious, provocative and practical articles and interviews that raise the quality of dialogue about talent.

We believe the current dialogue on talent issues provides few insights and little guidance to senior level leaders. We believe that an “honest broker” is needed to adjudicate the claims made by consultants and academics about the effectiveness of talent management practices and products. We believe that serious dialogue on this topic requires more than 500-word stories.

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No matter how clever, charming, or pleasant, most people have some unfortunate aspect to their personality. For the most part, these things are tolerable, but they can rise to the level of frustration and annoyance. Ironically, the bigger the talent, the more likely the person has some irritating tendency.

Drs. Robert and Joyce Hogan coined the phrase the dark side of personality to explain these character quirks. In contrast to the bright side—those traits that help people get along and get ahead—the dark side is harder to see and is slowly revealed over time. This article concerns strategies and tactics for dealing with the dark side—in an employee, in a boss, and even in yourself.
The Dark Side Defined
The Hogans came up with the idea of the dark side to explain how smart, hard-working, and accomplished executives sometimes derail. Dark-side features come out when people are not careful about managing their impressions—when they are stressed, tired, hungry, inebriated, or just don't care. Because of the unrelenting pressure and demands of their jobs, as well as the insulating effect of status, people in leadership positions are particularly at risk for exposing their dark sides. As my grandmother loved to say, “The higher the monkey climbs, the more you can see his butt.”

Dark-side tendencies rest on flawed assumptions about how to push one’s agenda. Strategies based on these assumptions are used to protect and enhance one’s interests by manipulating others. They have a selfish orientation and neglect the needs and wishes of other people, ultimately leading to self-defeating behavior that may secure minor short-term gains but at the expense of significant long-term losses. For example, talking up one’s achievements may impress others in the moment, but if a person keeps it up, he or she will be known as a self-promoting braggart.

One reason the dark side is hard to detect is because it is tied to the bright side in a twisted knot of strengths and weaknesses. For instance, passion can be bound up with emotional volatility; confidence can be tangled with arrogance; eagerness to please can be looped around an inability to think for oneself. So people live with the outbursts because they are inspired by the passion, or they overlook the lack of independent thought because they are won over by the acquiescence—at least until they grow tired of putting up with the downside.

The Hogans have identified eleven dark-side dimensions. These are defined in Table 1, where their associated strengths and weaknesses are also presented. Together the eleven traits cover a broad range of behavior. As also indicated in the table, they fall into three clusters representing distinct strategies for manipulating others: intimidation, seduction, and ingratiation. For example, the volatility of excitable is designed to scare others from getting too close; the flirtatious charm of colorful is intended to captivate attention; and the compliance of dutiful is intended to make one liked.

Rigidity is the killer in these traits. At the extreme, one loses the flexibility to keep passion from verging into volatility or self-confidence from morphing into arrogance. To be effective, a person must maintain control—must have these tendencies rather than be had by them. The key is being selective about when to use them and to what degree. And since today’s operating environment is so fluid and rapidly changing, this versatility is critical: What may be helpful in one context can be a hindrance in another. In this view, dark-side traits can be seen as strengths in overdrive, with the potential to become weaknesses through overuse.

But low standing on dark traits is not good either.
A study of executives that James LeBreton and I published with Joyce Hogan showed that both high and low standing were associated with counterproductive leadership behaviors. For instance, high diligent was associated with micromanagement and getting lost in the details, whereas low diligent was related to a lack of discipline in driving for results. High imaginative was associated with flitting from one grand vision to the next, but low imaginative was associated with a lack of strategic thinking. Slight elevations on the dark-side traits correlated with the most effective and versatile leadership behavior.

Robert Hogan emphasizes how dark traits disrupt interpersonal relationships, which interferes with building trust and teamwork. However, our research with Joyce showed that the dark traits were not just related to troubling interpersonal behavior but also to counterproductive strategic and tactical decisions. In fact, the latter correlations were actually stronger than the former. Thus, the dark side derails leaders by disrupting relationships and corrupting judgment, and the corrupting effect on judgment may be the more detrimental for executives and corporate performance.

Managing the Dark Side of Others

In Employees

Good staffing decisions can prevent much of the damage done by the dark side. But there is a catch: It is hard to detect dark traits in an interview or from thin slices of behavior. Good social skills can conceal the selfish nature of dark traits, and hiring managers are often attracted to the Siren’s call of their upside. Many leaders derail for precisely the same reason they were hired: Hewlett-Packard’s board made Carly Fiorina CEO for her supreme confidence and willingness to drive bold change; it fired her for strategic overreach and an inability to get results. Bill Clinton was elected on his dazzling charisma and then nearly impeached for the indiscretions made possible by his hold on a young White House intern.

Smart hiring processes will include a psychological evaluation or a test like the Hogan Development Survey to reveal dark-side tendencies. Much of the analysis is straightforward. Avoid mismatches: For instance, be wary of a high diligent for a strategic role, or a high mischievous for an execution role, or a high reserved where networking and relationships are priorities. Seek alignment: diligent for operational roles, imaginative for strategic roles, reserved for analytical roles. But be careful about extreme scores and consider the possibility of too much of a good thing. Slight elevations are generally preferable.

The more complicated part is that the dark side is unavoidable: Everyone has these tendencies, and in twenty years of assessing executives I have never seen a perfect candidate. And here is another rub: Risk and reward go together, and most truly high-potential employees have elevated dark-side traits. Think about the young Steve Jobs, whose explosive arrogance got him fired from the company he found- ed. It was the same passionate confidence that, once mellowed with age and experience, underwrote his transformation of the music distribution and the mobile-device industries when a desperate Apple gave him a second chance. Rather than trying to avoid the dark side, it is more practical to embrace it—but dig deep for evidence that the candidate is aware of these tendencies and is able to keep them in check. Finally, every onboarding plan should include a risk-management strategy for mitigating dark tendencies, especially during the stressful early phases of a transition.

In Bosses

Employees are most often subject to the vagaries of a boss’s dark side yet also are in a precarious position for confronting it directly. To paraphrase Voltaire, it is dangerous to be right when the boss is wrong. An employee has three choices: suffer, quit, or adapt. The way to adapt to a boss’s dark side is
The Eleven Dimensions to the Dark Side

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Dark Trait</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Cluster 1: Intimidation tactics designed to keep others at a safe distance</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Excitable</strong></td>
<td>moody, easily annoyed, hard to please, emotionally unpredictable</td>
<td>Passion &amp; enthusiasm</td>
<td>Outbursts &amp; volatility</td>
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<td><strong>Skeptical</strong></td>
<td>distrustful, cynical, sensitive to criticism, focused on the negative</td>
<td>Politically astute &amp; hard to fool</td>
<td>Mistrustful &amp; quarrelsome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cautious</strong></td>
<td>unassertive, resistant to change, slow to make decisions</td>
<td>Careful &amp; precise</td>
<td>Indecisive &amp; risk-averse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reserved</strong></td>
<td>aloof, indifferent to the feeling of others, keeping to oneself</td>
<td>Stoic &amp; calm under pressure</td>
<td>Uncommunicative &amp; insensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leisurely</strong></td>
<td>overtly cooperative but privately irritable, stubborn, uncooperative</td>
<td>Relaxed &amp; easy going</td>
<td>Passive aggressive &amp; indirect</td>
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<td><strong>Cluster 2: Seduction tactics designed to win the admiration of others</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Bold</strong></td>
<td>overly self-confident, entitlement, inflated feelings of self-worth</td>
<td>Confidence &amp; conviction</td>
<td>Arrogant &amp; grandiose</td>
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<td><strong>Mischievous</strong></td>
<td>charming, risk-taking, limit-testing and excitement-seeking</td>
<td>Risk tolerant &amp; persuasive</td>
<td>Impulsive &amp; manipulative</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Colorful</strong></td>
<td>dramatic, attention-seeking, interruptive, poor listening skills</td>
<td>Entertaining &amp; expressive</td>
<td>Melodramatic &amp; grand-standing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Imaginative</strong></td>
<td>original, unique perspective, thinking and acting in unusual or eccentric ways</td>
<td>Creative &amp; visionary</td>
<td>Wacky ideas &amp; constant change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cluster 3: Ingratiation tactics designed to make one liked and valued by others</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Diligent</strong></td>
<td>meticulous, precise, detail-oriented, with a strong work ethic and high expectations</td>
<td>Hard working &amp; high standards</td>
<td>Perfectionistic &amp; micromanaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dutiful</strong></td>
<td>eager to please and reluctant to act independently or express disagreement</td>
<td>Compliant &amp; deferential</td>
<td>Submissive &amp; conflict avoidant</td>
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to understand the motivation behind the frustrating behavior so one can play psychological judo and turn these dark forces on themselves.

For instance, give insecure intimidators their space, and be strategic about when to deliver bad news. Be thoughtful about timing based on their mood, and definitely don’t surprise them. Send an email about issues in setting an agenda for a conversation to happen after they have had time to process the initial emotional perturbation. And reinforce the message of being on their side and having their back.

Give charismatic seducers the respect and attention they crave. Expect them to take credit for the good ideas of others and to pass out blame for their mistakes. Praise their success with a detailed recounting of what was so admirable and how people can learn from their example. And make sure feedback isn’t too threatening to their need to see themselves as amazing. Rather, explain how troubling behaviors and decisions may cause some to see them as somewhat less amazing.

Reassure needy ingratiators that they are liked and valued. They are sensitive to being rejected and will react to the slightest hint that they are being judged. Frame feedback in terms of how certain behaviors may undermine the trust and confidence others have in them. Signal appreciation for the high expectations of a diligent boss but expect to be held to perfectionistic standards. Sympathize with a dutiful boss’s eagerness to please his boss but don’t expect him to run cover for anyone from his boss.

Finally, it is necessary to take one’s own dark side into account to avoid joining the dysfunctional dance. Toxicity is amplified by certain combinations: a dutiful employee is at risk for blind obedience to the reckless plans of a mischievous boss. Sparks will fly when an excitable boss is set off by a bold employee doing her own thing against the boss’ preferences. Of course, this advice assumes an awareness of one’s own dark side and the capacity to manage it.

Managing Your Own Dark Side

The dark side is hardest to see in oneself. People often rationalize and justify their selfish strategies to manipulate others. From years of executive development I have come to define maturity in terms of how much you kid yourself about how much you are kidding yourself. The best leaders know themselves and are able to see through their schemes to manipulate other people, and even themselves, into something that may stroke their egos now but will come back to haunt them—and their organization.

The starting point is self-awareness: You have to know your unseemly tendencies, and it takes guts to own up to your dark side. The best way to learn about it is through a combination of objective personality
assessment and subjective behavioral feedback from coworkers. Test results will illuminate your dark tendencies, and the coworker feedback will validate and prioritize them. Feedback also puts your dark traits in context and tells you, concretely, how they show up at work. You may even be able to get clues as to what things trigger your dark side and put you at greater risk.

But awareness is not enough. As Freud himself said, the trouble with the insight model is that it merely transforms a clueless neurotic into an enlightened neurotic. You have to change your behavior, and this requires a willingness to step outside your comfort zone. Carly Fiorina may be the poster child as a leader whose dark side got her into trouble yet she refused to learn from it and change her behavior. Her failed presidential bid shows the same pattern that got her shown the door at H-P: grand ambitions with no credible plans for execution.

Once you know what tendencies to change, you have to learn what sets them off. It is usually a threat: The skeptical executive learns he gets paranoid when people are whispering. The cautious manager gets nervous when an employee suggests a change and says, “No,” before really considering it. It is another great irony that most offensive behavior comes from a defensive position. Monitoring your body’s natural feedback loops can help: When do you feel tense or start to sweat?

There are tricks and techniques for redirecting nervous energy into more constructive behaviors in the moment. Recognize the mounting pressure, and defuse the tension with deep breathing or applied relaxation techniques. Ask yourself the self-honest question: Do I want to do this for me or for some greater purpose? Give yourself time before committing to major decisions, and reevaluate an initial position after sleeping on it. Enlist a trusted colleague to help keep you in bounds: Discuss the tendency, review the warning signs, and give the person permission to provide real-time feedback.

Learning to prevent your dark side from overshadowing your strengths requires extra energy. The mind draws from a limited supply of glucose-based fuel to regulate behavior in a conscious, controlled way. So you need to do all the things you know you should be doing to maintain good energy: Eat a healthy diet, exercise, get a good night’s sleep, and punctuate going all out with breaks to recharge.

Ultimately, managing your dark side comes down to changing your mind—recognizing when you have the wrong theory and need to reboot certain beliefs about how to get along and get ahead. The colorful leader learns the folly in thinking, “They can’t get enough of me!” The leisurely manager accepts that smiling “Yes” and then acting “No” creates enemies. These operating assumptions are typically formed in very different circumstances, such as when you were younger and as a means for dealing with a big, scary world. Recognizing how things have changed, how you are less vulnerable now and have other options, is pivotal to the flexibility needed to be effective.

The goal of taming your dark side is removing the waste and inefficiency to release the potential and effectiveness. But where does the competitive edge stop and the rough edge start? The difference often lies at the point where self-interest gives way to the greater good—when feeling safe, important, and liked comes before the team or organization. TQ

Further Reading