

LEADERSHIP AND DARK SIDE PERSONALITY TRAITS.

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There are two sides of personality. The bright side of personality concerns one's public reputation—it is the stereotypical ways in which leaders act on a day-to-day basis. Some leaders are strategic, charismatic, and outspoken, whereas others are more tactical, planful, and humble. Co-workers tend to have high levels of agreement when describing the day-to-day behavioural patterns of their leaders, and these patterns are very predictive of leadership success. Another key predictor of leadership success concerns the dark side of personality. Dark side personality traits are irritating, counterproductive behaviours that interfere with a leader's ability to build cohesive, goal oriented teams. These tendencies are most apparent when leaders are not managing their self-image, such as during times of stress, when focusing on task accomplishment, multitasking, dealing with tight deadlines, or in a crisis. Given the complexity of most leadership positions these days, there seem to be plenty of opportunities for these dark side traits to appear.

Table One: Dark Side Personality Traits

- **EXCITABLE** – concerns dramatic mood swings, emotional outbursts, explosive tempers, unpredictable moods, and taking offence when things don't go well. These leaders are anxious and unhappy and make no effort to hide their feelings.
- **SKEPTICAL** – concerns an extreme mistrust of others. These leaders think others are after their jobs, are constantly on the lookout for incidents of disloyalty, and will retaliate if they believe they have been wronged.
- **CAUTIOUS** – concerns an unrealistic fear of making “dumb” mistakes. These leaders lack self-confidence, do everything possible to avoid surprises and not get into trouble, and play to not make mistakes rather than win.
- **RESERVED** – concerns a tendency to be painfully objective and to not care about others' feelings or concerns. These leaders come across as mean, distant, and aloof, and tend to manipulate others by withholding information.
- **LEISURELY** – concerns a tendency to overtly agree with others requests, but showing irritation to the request by not turning in tasks on time or completed. These passive-aggressive leaders have good social skills but are covertly resentful of requests made by others.
- **BOLD** – concerns a tendency to take on too much, overestimate one's skills, and underestimating the time and resources needing to get tasks completed. These narcissistic leaders often feel entitled, have difficulty sharing credit, reinterpret data to fit their own worldview, and do not learn from failure.

- **MISCHIEVOUS** – concerns a tendency to push limits, lie, and break rules. These leaders engage in organizationally delinquent behaviours just to see if they can get away with it.
 - **COLORFUL** – concerns an unhealthy need to be the centre of attention. These high maintenance leaders think they are something special, and the sole purpose of others is to tell them how important or attractive they are.
 - **IMAGINATIVE** – these eccentric, offbeat, self-absorbed leaders are a fountain of ideas—many of which are ungrounded in reality. Direct reports often question the judgment of these types of leaders.
 - **DILIGENT** – concerns a strong need to be meticulous, precise, and orderly. These perfectionistic leaders need to do everything well, cannot prioritize or delegate, and flounder in ambiguous situations.
 - **DUTIFUL** – concerns a reluctance to “rock the boat” and a powerful need to please superiors. These ingratiating leaders have perfected the art of strategic sucking up and never learned to stand up for their staffs or say no to requests from superiors.
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A listing of eleven common dark side traits can be found in Table Two. There are several aspects of these dark side traits that are worth noting. First, they often co-vary with social skills and can be virtually impossible to detect in interviews. In particular, people with Bold, Mischievous, and Colourful dark side traits are very good at picking up on social cues and leaving positive impressions on others. Second, these dark side tendencies were at one time useful methods for coping with stress. For example, people with Reserved dark side traits learned that by shutting out others they could more effectively deal with stress. Those with Diligent tendencies learned that they could effectively cope with stress through planning and micromanaging the details. As individual contributors these tendencies were often successful coping strategies, but as leaders these same tendencies generally alienate followers and destroy teamwork. Third, everyone has at least one or two of these tendencies (these authors included). Fourth, having some level of these tendencies actually can be beneficial to leaders. As seen in Table Three, having a moderate level of dark side tendencies can be important components of leadership success. But when these tendencies become extreme, they erode teamwork and are the subject of many of the water cooler conversations among co-workers.

Table Two: Moderate and Extreme Dark Side Tendencies

Dark Side Trait	Moderate	Extreme
Excitable	Consistently generate Enthusiasm	Waiver between enthusiasm and intimidation
Skeptical	Vigilant to organizational politics and changes	Think people are after your job
Cautious	Take time when making decisions	Take time making even minor decisions
Reserved	Can make tough calls	Create a “cold” culture and are painfully objective
Leisurely	May be “diplomatically” untruthful at times	Frequently say one on thing but do another
Bold	Have firm beliefs	Believe that your way is the only way
Mischievous	Test limits but follow rules when necessary	Enjoy breaking rules and taking risks
Imaginative	Have lots of good ideas	Have lots of good ideas that are never implemented
Colourful	Use charisma to charm Others	Dominate meetings and consistently melodramatic
Diligent	Can focus on details	Cannot see the big picture
Dutiful	Build relationships with superiors	Lack a spine when dealing with superiors

As a way of making this information more concrete, we describe five examples of these dark side personality traits: Examples for the other six dark side traits

can easily found in the pages of the Wall Street Journal, The Economist, Fortune, or any other business and political periodical.

Excitable. Excitable people are energetic, forceful, and intense; they manipulate others by yelling and intimidation. Excitable managers make an initial dramatic impact on organizations, and then things begin to erode as the staff becomes disaffected. Al Dunlap, a burly and aggressive West Point graduate, improved the stock of four large American corporations—American Can, Lily Tulip, Crown Zellerbach, and Scott Paper Company—by ruthlessly cutting costs and driving sales; he became known as "Chainsaw Al" for his brutal management style. When he was hired to turn around the Sunbeam Corporation in July, 1996, Sunbeam shares went up 60%, to \$16.50 per share, based on Wall Street's expectations of his performance.

At Sunbeam he began by denouncing the former management as incompetent, hired an accounting firm to justify the cost reductions he wanted to make, and began making drastic cuts in staff and facilities. In the first three quarters of 1997, Sunbeam's earnings met or exceeded expectations and the stock hit a record high of \$50 per share. In public, things looked rosy, but behind the scenes, performance was rapidly deteriorating. In early 1997 Dunlap's management team was given wildly unrealistic goals: double total revenue, boost operating margins from 2.5% to 20%, and generate \$600 million in new product sales in 12 months. When they didn't meet these arbitrary targets, Dunlap turned viciously profane and somewhat violent. Executives said he would throw papers or furniture, bang his hands on his desk, and shout so ferociously that a manager's hair would be blown back by the stream of air rushing from Dunlap's mouth. "Hair spray day" became a code phrase among the staff that signified potential tantrums. By midyear the stock had fallen from \$53 to \$6 dollars per share. The company lost \$898 million in 1998, and Dunlap was dismissed but still sued Sunbeam for \$5.3 million in severance pay.

Mischievous. Mischievous people are bright, charming, manipulative, and enjoy testing the limits and taking chances. Mischievous managers make a strong first impression because of their obvious intelligence, wit, and daring. Mark Whitacre was a 32 year old whiz kid at Archer Daniels Midland (ADM). His charm and cleverness propelled him rapidly up through the organization and, at age 32, he became the head of the biotechnology division at ADM. In 2000, in conjunction with Tyson, Con-Agra, and some other international firms, he organized a global price-fixing scheme around a product called Lycene (which is used in animal feed). He also began working with the FBI on a sting operation, and for three years, Whitacre charmed his co-conspirators into talking about their price-fixing activities, which he recorded on tape. By "leading the witnesses", he collected over 200 hours of wiretap and video information. However, while he was misleading his co-conspirators, he was also lying to the FBI, and embezzling \$9.5 million from ADM. When the FBI learned of the embezzlement, they gave up on the case and went after Whitacre. Prior to the time the case unravelled, however, Whitacre thought he should and would be promoted into the Presidency of ADM, and he may well have been in line for the job.

Colourful. Colourful people are bright, energetic, interesting, skilled at calling attention to themselves, and attracted to careers in sales and politics, where their charisma is an obvious asset. As managers, however, their periodic, unusual public displays and their fondness for crises ultimately exhaust their followers. Foday Sankoh, the former revolutionary leader from Sierra Leone, was a riveting public speaker who persuaded an increasingly larger group of followers that he was semi-divine, immune to bullets, and able to vanish at will. His abundant social and political skills helped him create the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), a very popular organization at its outset. He wanted to use the RUF to appropriate the regional diamond mines, whose profits would be used to provide free health care, education, and other government benefits.

Sankoh started the civil war in Sierra Leone in 1991 and soon afterwards captured the diamond mines, began buying arms from Charles Taylor, and started a ten year reign of terror. It is estimated that his “army” killed between 50,000 and 200,000 people, many of them savagely mutilated. By the time a small force of British peacekeepers arrived to capture Sankoh and pacify the country, Sierra Leone was the poorest country on earth.

Imaginative. Imaginative people are bright, interesting, creative problem solvers, whose unusual schemes and sometimes grandiose visions of future realities often attract a lot of attention. As managers, they make a strong initial impression based on their obvious intelligence and striking strategic visions. In time, however, they tend to lose credibility because so few of their ideas actually work out.

Gerald Levin, the disgraced former CEO of Time Warner, describes himself as “a very strange man” who was given to spouting existentialist philosophy in the board room and dreaming of creative business mergers that would establish his place in the CEO Hall of Fame. In 1990, he helped engineer a merger between Time and Warner Communications, which is generally regarded as having been a poor deal for Time. He instigated a palace coup in 1992, and became CEO of Time as a result. In an effort to compensate for the poorly advised merger with Warner Communications, Levin sold Time Warner to AOL in 2001 in what is generally regarded as the most catastrophic merger in the history of American business--a deal which lost \$200 billion in shareholder’s money. Levin resigned as CEO of AOL Time Warner in December, 2001. In his frequent interviews with biographers and journalists since 2001, Levin comes across as somewhat other worldly, preoccupied with philosophical abstractions, and concerned about his legacy as a CEO.

Diligent. Diligent people are driven, hard working, stubborn, and perfectionistic; as leaders they specialize in micro-management. They are unwilling to delegate, unable to prioritize, and have a powerful need for control. Michael Eisner has been the CEO of Disney for 20 years. “Disney is known to be so centralized under Mr. Eisner that no creative decision is too small for his consideration, whether it is viewing pilots for new television shows, selecting which animated characters to emphasize in a film...or the colour of the bumper cars in the theme parks.” In addition, Mr. Eisner’s combative style has forced a

number of talented executives to leave and led to the recent nasty split with Steven Jobs and Pixar. Yet despite this loss of talent and a ten year decline in profitability, Eisner has been one of the most highly compensated CEOs in the world. In 1993, Disney's earnings (after an accounting change) fell 63 percent, but Eisner earned \$203 million.

How to Fix the Dark Side Problem. As mentioned earlier, one real problem with many of these dark side traits is that they are associated with strong social skills. Many times leaders with problematic dark side tendencies have the ability to leave strong, positive impressions on others and often get hired or promoted as a result. Yet there are several practical and cost effective steps organizations can take to minimize the damage associated with the dark side of personality. First, organizations should embed dark side assessments as part of the managerial selection or succession planning processes. These assessments are relatively inexpensive and easy to administer, and organizations need to know how future leaders are likely to react under the stresses and strains of leadership. Similarly, leaders also need to be aware of their own dark side tendencies. Many leaders (but unfortunately, not their followers) seem oblivious to their dark side traits, which is not all that surprising given the circumstances surrounding the manifestation of these counterproductive behaviours. Providing leaders with insight about those dark side traits that are likely to alienate their followers is an important step in reducing these counterproductive tendencies.

Second, just because leaders have dark side personality tendencies does not necessarily mean they are being exhibited in the workplace. Some leaders are aware of their dark sides and have learned how to control it; others may not be experiencing enough stress or strain for their dark sides to appear. Multi-rater feedback, and direct report ratings in particular, can pinpoint whether the positive or negative aspects of dark side personality traits are evident in the workplace.

Third, coaching can help minimize the impact of the dark side. Leaders can be taught how to recognize the situations likely to trigger dark side behaviours, how to more effectively cope with stress, and what to do to minimize the impact of their counterproductive tendencies. However, it is important to note that because dark side tendencies are deeply ingrained habits, it often takes a long-term, concerted effort to minimize these tendencies. Sending problematic leaders to three-five day leadership training program in order to get "fixed" will not likely change these habits. In addition, the behavioural tendencies associated with some dark side traits, such as Skeptical, Cautious, Leisurely, and Diligent, can be very hard to coach. Leaders with these tendencies often times have a high fear of change, see no reason to change, or will tell you that they will change when they have no intention of ever doing so.