
Examining the dark side of your leadership

by Norman Chorn

I have been reflecting on my business experiences over the last 12 months. As with most of you, I found this to be a particularly challenging time. Happily our own business activity remained reasonably buoyant, but a key feature was the uncharacteristically difficult behaviour I encountered from some leaders in certain situations. In particular, their poor treatment of subordinates and colleagues seemed inconsistent with what I had observed in my previous experiences with them.

Clearly, many of these atypical behaviours were the product of stress and the need to make tough decisions. Knowing this helped a little in dealing with them. Nonetheless, I got to wondering if there were any noteworthy patterns that might be worth further reflection.

The research into leadership effectiveness is noted for the fact that the findings are often inconclusive and divergent. Large numbers of studies have produced many different results and the field remains dynamic and there is much we don't yet understand. Research into leadership failure, on the other hand, produces quite conclusive and consistent findings¹. It seems that bosses who undermine the loyalty and commitment of their team quickly find that there is no team to lead. The Achilles heel that ends many leadership careers seems to be the poor treatment of others².

In discussing this phenomenon with my wife and colleague, a chartered organisational psychologist, she pointed out that most personality characteristics have a "shadow" side. Initially observed by the eminent psychologist Carl Jung, this darker side of one's personality is most often the result of excessive amounts of some of your key personality traits – themselves often identified as your major strengths.

Put another way, it seems that your key strengths may well have a mirror image that produce major flaws in your style of leadership. I may well have been observing examples of the shadow side of these leaders as I noticed their uncharacteristic behaviour!

¹ Hogan, R. (2007). *Personality and the fate of organizations*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

² Dotlich, K. & Cairo, P. (2003). *Why CEOs Fail*. John Wiley & Sons.

Being fascinated by this notion, I came upon some interesting research that seeks to uncover leaders' dark sides by analysing what derails them under pressure. The research, conducted amongst 11,000 leaders in the UK, identified 11 "derailers" — strengths which turned into flaws under pressure³.

In reality, each of these so-called derailers was actually a potential leadership strength. The derailment occurs when the strength is overused, or used too enthusiastically. This is likely to happen when leader's confidence is too high, when they are inexperienced, or when they are under extreme pressure and find themselves "pushing too hard".

The list of these 11 "strengths" and their relevant shadow sides is presented at the end of this short article⁴. It is interesting to note that these strengths exist within you as complete dimensions, ie you possess the ability to display both sides of the coin – both the strength and the shadow side. We learn to manage the shadow side as we gain experience and stay grounded. Quite literally, we become skilled at mastering and controlling some of our less effective (and less attractive) impulses.

However, as we become stressed or over-enthusiastic, so we run the risk of manifesting our shadow side behaviours. Our strengths can literally derail us!

This illustrates the potential hazards associated with rapid promotion into positions of power and leadership or when a leader is overcome with his/her sense of power and ability. When this occurs, previously mastered and controlled impulses can re-emerge to detrimental effect as restraint falls away. Interestingly, significant stress produces a similar effect on the leader.

The paradox here is that these self-defeating aspects of personality will often be favoured, even cherished, by those that possess them. Quite naturally, the more benefit we reap from a particular strategy, the more we will exploit it. From this perspective, the problem for leaders is often their success, and especially extreme success.⁵

So, what are the implications of the shadow side characteristics of leadership? Three key issues seem to jump out of this:

³ Corkindale, *Don't let your strength become your weakness*, Harvard Business Publishing, 2009

⁴ Trickey and Hyde, *A decade of the Dark Side: Fighting the demons at work*, 2009

⁵ Hogan, R. (2007). *Personality and the fate of organizations*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

1. Maintain an awareness of your personal strengths and potential shadow side behaviours. Be aware of the predominant style of your team as well, as this could produce difficulties when the pressure is on
2. Try and remain “grounded” and humble about your strengths. In particular, beware of getting the “hots” (we simply have to do this!) about a particular course of action. This may be an early warning signal that you are losing perspective and crossing over to the darker side of your strength
3. Be careful of rapidly promoting individuals and simply assuming they will go from strength to strength. They are likely to take this as a cue that their personal strengths are valuable to the organisation and that they should use them more forcefully.

I hope that these reflections are useful as you prepare to wind down 2009 and prepare for the year ahead.

Best wishes

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List of Strengths and Potential Derailers⁶

Every one of these traits has a positive side. It is only when enthusiasm tips over into volatility, for example, that problems can be caused.

<p><u>E-V</u> <u>Enthusiastic-Volatile</u> A tendency to swing from enthusiasm for people, projects and organisations to disappointment or disaffection with them. Others find such people hard to work with because they are moody, irritable, bad tempered, inconsistent and impossible to please.</p>	<p><u>C-M</u> <u>Charming-Manipulative</u> A tendency to be impulsive, excitement seeking, and manipulative. Such people appear charming and make a good first impression, but are hard to work with because they are more 'spin' than substance, take risks and ignore their mistakes. They are also hard to advise and don't fully evaluate the consequences of their decisions.</p>
<p><u>S-M</u> <u>Shrewd-Mistrustful</u> A tendency to be suspicious and to mistrust others' motives and intentions. Such people are shrewd and difficult to fool, but hard to work with because they take criticism personally, readily feel mistreated and are prone to retaliate when they feel they have been wronged.</p>	<p><u>V-D</u> <u>Vivacious-Dramatic</u> A tendency to expect others to see them as interesting and worthwhile. They perform well in public, appear charismatic and competent and know how to create an aura. They are hard to work with because they are self-centred, impulsive, over committed, too quick to take the credit and unwilling to listen - especially to negative feedback.</p>
<p><u>C-C</u> <u>Careful-Cautious</u> A tendency to be over concerned about making mistakes and being embarrassed. Such people are reluctant to take the initiative for fear of being criticised and are hard to work with because they are rule-bound and unwilling to take chances or express controversial opinions.</p>	<p><u>I-E</u> <u>Imaginative-Eccentric</u> A tendency to think and act in ways that are unusual, striking and perhaps at times odd. Others may find them hard to work with because, although they may be creative, they are impulsive, eccentric and unaware of how socially inappropriate their ideas may be.</p>

⁶ Hogan, R. & Hogan, J. (1997). *The Hogan Development Survey Manual*, UK Edition. Psychological Consultancy Ltd.

<p><u>I-D</u> <u>Independent-Detached</u> A tendency to be self-sufficient and indifferent to social feedback or the moods and feelings of others. Others may find them hard to work with because they seem self-focused, uninterested in other people's problems and unaware of how their actions affect others.</p>	<p><u>D-P</u> <u>Diligent-Perfectionist</u> A tendency to be indiscriminate about when to be conscientious, orderly and attentive to detail. Such people are organised and hard working but difficult to work with because they are unable to delegate. Their determination to do every task equally well makes them seem fussy, critical, and stubborn about their work.</p>
<p><u>F-PA</u> <u>Focused-Passive Aggressive</u> A tendency to be inflexible about work practices and to be stubborn about sticking to one's own timetable and standards of performance. Others may find such people hard to work with because of their procrastination, stubbornness and reluctance to be part of a team.</p>	<p><u>D-D</u> <u>Dutiful-Dependent</u> A tendency to be eager to gain approval and to be excessively careful to please their superiors. Such people defer to others in order to maintain amicable relationships. They seem pleasant, agreeable and compliant, but are difficult to work with because they are indecisive and find it impossible to make decisions on their own.</p>
<p><u>C-A</u> <u>Confident-Arrogant</u> A tendency to overestimate one's talents and accomplishments, to ignore one's shortcomings, and to have a strong sense of entitlement. Although they make a strong first impression, such people are hard to work with because they are opinionated, self-absorbed, and unwilling to learn from their mistakes.</p>	