



Working with You Is Killing Me #1

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Being Hooked – Emotional Traps

Credit: This chapter draws on the work of, and gives credit to, Katherine Crowley and Kathi Elster, whose exceptional book ‘Working with You Is Killing Me’ was the inspiration for this article.

The workplace is a volatile environment inhabited by emotional creatures who often rub each other the wrong way. Scratch the rational surface of any company, and you will find a breeding ground of negative emotions – anxiousness about performance, anger with colleagues, resentment with management, and stress and burnout from pressuring targets.

The first chapter in this series relates to being emotionally hooked.

Meet, Claudia {a fictitious name – but a real person} – a highly successful and powerful senior executive, but also a nightmare to work with. I was engaged by the non-exec Board of a professional services firm to coach Claudia. The request came after continuous resentment and complaints from her colleagues coupled with an unprecedented level of resignations from members of her team. Confidential exit interviews revealed that the main reason people gave for leaving the secure job with the reputable firm was that “working with her, is killing me”.

At her best, Claudia tends to be very enthusiastic about, and work hard on, new products. She brings a sense of energy, dynamism, and urgency to new projects. At her worst, she is extremely hard to please and she is high maintenance – requiring a lot of handholding and reassurance. Claudia’s character is exemplified by inappropriate anger coupled with unstable and intense relationships that alternate between passion and idealisation to deflation and devaluation. Psychometric analysis of her profile revealed that Claudia expects to be disappointed in relationships. She anticipates being cheated, ignored, criticised, or treated unfairly. Consequently, she is constantly on guard for signs that others have treated, or will treat, her badly. In business, this translates to being sharp, on top of things and hard to fool. However, when she thinks that she has been mistreated, she erupts in emotional display that may involve losing her temper, yelling from one end of the office to the other, or sulking for days. Because she is so alert for signs of mistreatment, she finds them everywhere, even when others cannot see them. The distinctive emotional tantrums of Claudia make her unpredictable – It is hard to know when she is going to erupt, and what this eruption would look like. Furthermore, because she is so edgy and self-centred she is unrewarding to deal

with. As a result of her unpredictability and edginess, she has trouble building and maintaining a team.

Claudia does not handle stress, pressure, failure, disappointment, or criticism very well, and she tends to 'melt down' rather easily. It does not take much for her to turn from being passionate and enthusiastic to becoming disheartened. In her history of relationships, she has been so easily disappointed, and when disappointed, her first instinct was to withdraw or leave. A key to understanding Claudia is her extreme degree of self-centricity. All information and experience is filtered through the lense of what does it mean for her personally, and she takes every comment, gesture, and expression of others personally. She personalises everything, but she does it privately, so all that others see and experience are the emotional outbursts, the sulkiness, and the tendency to withdraw.

Now consider others' experience working with Claudia. Those working with her may feel that they have to be careful in all their interactions with her with the fear of offending her. Those reporting to her often feel that live in a constant state of terror, finding that they spend more time managing their relationship with her, than concentrating on their job. It is common for them to start their day wondering in what mood Claudia is, as her mood may affect the rest of their day. Their decisions when to request or negotiate a budget for their projects or initiatives, is not driven by the business environment, but by her daily mood. In a series of 360-degree interviews, those working for her suggested that the way of remaining sane, is to provide her with plenty of reassurance, keep her informed to minimise surprises, and give her a lot of previews so she knows what is coming. The general principle of handling her is the equivalent of trying to sooth a fretful child.

Being Hooked

The first emotional trap is that of being hooked – having a consistent irritable reaction to someone or something at work - i.e., whenever we come across this person or this thing at work, we feel irritated, annoyed, anxious, frustrated...

Being hooked means feeling trapped in relationships, positions, roles, and situations that drain our energy, invade our thoughts, keep us awake at night and make us feel stuck in no-win positions.

Here are some additional examples: Having someone 'stealing' your ideas and taking credit for them ● having constant complaints from a particular customer who is never satisfied ● being bombarded with unstoppable work demands ● being forced to use an inefficient centralised template or system

The symptoms of being hooked are any of the followings:

- Incompetence – Is there someone at work whose incompetence drives you mental?
- Restrictive Interdependency – Is there someone at work on whom you depend to do your work, and whose way of operating prevents you from progressing your work?
- Maladaptive Behaviour – Is there someone at work whose irrational behaviour wears on your nerves?
- Withdrawal Reactions – To cope with stress at work, do you engage in excessive eating, alcohol drinking, watching TV, or using mind altering substances?

Businesses expect professional and non-emotional behaviour from its employees. Yet, many circumstances at work give rise to strong emotions. Individuals that are in such situation, feel trapped, stuck in a losing game. They cannot free themselves from the bad situation, and their emotions remain unexpressed and suppressed. They feel that the only two options open for them are either 'suck it up' or 'quit'.

This experience of feeling caught in an emotionally distressing work situation is labelled **being hooked**. It is manifested in consistently having a strong negative internal reaction to someone (or something) at work. The degree of being hooked can vary from a mild irritation (such as a reaction to a colleague tone of voice) to a severe emotional breakdown (such as the inability to cope with line manager's irrational behaviour).

The normal and common reaction when being hooked is activated (i.e., when someone else's behaviour irritates us) is to blame our irritation and emotional responses on that person's behaviour – but that doesn't solve anything. We are still kept hooked. The way out is to re-frame and manage our *internal emotional responses* first – i.e., controlling our automatic reaction that someone else's behaviour triggered inside us. The principle here is simple – If we can control our emotional reaction, we can liberate ourselves from being hooked.

The process of changing our emotional response to irritating circumstances is termed **unhooking**. As opposed to feeling insulted by the constant need to chase a customer who will not return your calls, you can unhook by not taking it as a personal rejection and accepting it as part of doing business, where the customer is 'king'. Instead of getting irritated by the incompetence of your colleague, you can unhook by changing your expectations and taking corrective actions to prevent the negative impact of that person's ineptitude. Rather than despising the malicious office gossip, you can unhook by setting clear boundaries and showing no interest.

Easier said than done – not necessarily.

There are four simple steps to unhooking that help you release the negative emotions and stay calm, while taking specific actions to change your experience.

- **Physical action:** This step aims to release the negative energy caused by being hooked. As emotional discomfort produces shallow breath, you start by focusing on your breathing, and consciously breathing deeply and gently. If possible, engage in some physical activity such as walking round the block. This helps releasing the physical sensation associated with the negative emotion of being hooked.
- **Mental Reframing:** Here you try to look at your situation from a different perspective, view your circumstances objectively, and evaluate the practical options open to you. At this step your rational part of the brain takes over from the emotional one. Ask yourself:
 - What is happening here? – e.g., my invoice is overdue again (for the last five consecutive times), the client's finance manager did not pay the invoice I have raised, she ignored all my last two 'gentle reminders' emails, and she did not return my call
 - What are the facts? – e.g., I need the invoice cleared within seven days to pay my suppliers

- What part did the other person play in it? – e.g., She is disorganised, lacks respects for others, and does not care about anyone else but herself
- How did I contribute to what has happened? – e.g., I take her incompetence and lack of response personally, I try to pacify her by using a very gentle approach, it stops me from wanting to do more work for this client
- What are my realistic options? – e.g., I can stop personalising her bad attitude; she does not reject me, she is just dismissive of all suppliers; I can acknowledge her feeling of being very busy and under pressure from many suppliers and agree with her to send her a reminder a week before the invoice is due; I can ask to meet with the client and agree a process of timely payment of invoices; I can agree with the client a penalty close for late payment
- **Verbal Expression:** This is a proactive action aiming to restructure the situation that causes you grief. The verbal expression requires you to focus on the overall goal as opposed to remaining stuck in the petty details. The aim is to express information in a manner that resolves problems rather than perpetuating them. As such, the verbal expression should contain no judgement, no blame, no accusations, no pointing finger, and no anger or any other negative emotion. It means taking responsibility for your own part of the situation. The verbal expression is not about a compromise, or about being nice. It is about clear, direct, and effective communication that allows the listener to hear you and consider your suggestions. Thus, instead of fuelling your own frustration regarding the late payment of invoices, you can approach the client and / or the finance manager, and ask: “How can I help you get the invoices paid on time? – ... I can alert you a week before they are due ... I can arrange a direct debit from your account...”
- **Toolbox Utilisation:** This step is the equivalent of introducing a third-party to support your argument. Here we utilise simple business tools that either measures certain behaviours, create a behavioural benchmark, or disseminate information. The toolbox includes amongst others: job description ● goal setting document ● performance reviews ● policies and procedures ● disciplinary actions forms ● memo, emails, and letters ● meetings’ agenda ● documentation.