



## Working with You Is Killing Me – Part #2

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### The Empty Persona

*This blog builds on an excellent, but not well known article – Managing Away Bad Habits - by James Waldroop and Timothy Butler that was published in 2000 in Harvard Business Review; as well as 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 series.*

**"I was here on Saturday afternoon. Where were you?"** This kind of "subtle" pressure to work 24/7 is typical of the 'Hero' – one of the four characters featuring in this chapter of 'Working with You Is Killing Me'. This chapter focuses on those colleagues who drive you crazy; yet you find it very difficult to challenge or to tackle them, simply because they are star performers. But they are star performers with a dark-side – they have a seemingly fatal personality flaw or a psychological limitation that colours their achievements, holds them back, and makes the life of others a misery.

We have all worked with people who are star performers but have one serious personality shortcoming that makes life difficult for everyone, limits their effectiveness, and often proves to be their professional undoing. Robert Hogan applied a mental disorders' taxonomy into organisational life. He identified eleven characteristics that limit star performers and causing despair to those around them. He calls these the "dark side" of personality.

Waldroop and Butler condensed these characteristics into six profiles of destructive behaviour patterns they labelled 'bad habits'. They use the term as a shorthand way of referring to deep-rooted psychological flaws. 'Bad habits' or 'dark-side' are not compulsions like nail biting, swearing, or smoking. Nor they apply to people who at one time or another bully colleagues, been too negative, or over argumentative. Instead, the terms refer to high performers whose psychological makeup translates into consistently problematic behaviour. Their 'dark-side' is a central component of their personality and informs the way they behave from day to day. I call it the 'Empty Persona Syndrome' as there is something shallow or missing in their character, that makes them all front, but without much substance. This chapter looks at four empty personas: (a) the Hero, (b) the Bulldozer, (c) the Rebel, and (d) the Pessimist.

## Type #1: The Hero

The Heroes are the superhuman of the workplace. They take pride in solving any problem that crosses their way. They are naturally resourceful, capable, and competent in any work situation.

The Heroes are driven by 'Need for Achievement'. They thrive on 'mission impossible' challenges and spend their life in a rat race, moving from one target to another. The inner action voice that drives them is 'Hurry Up' – work quickly and deliver high output in a short time.

The Heroes always push themselves – and, by extension subordinates – working too hard, doing too much, and doing it for too long. Their strengths are achievement orientation, high energy level, 'can-do' attitude, efficiency, and fire-fighting. Their weaknesses are empathy to others, ability to reflect, attention to detailed work, reliability, and precision.

Typical behaviours of the Hero include: --- First one to arrive at work and the last one to leave --- Give up, cancel, or postpone vacation or holiday plans because of work commitment --- Let down family members by not spending time with them, being always busy, or breaking promises --- Volunteer to solve problems outside their job description --- Fire emails to colleagues and clients at the early hours of the night --- Have their BlackBerry or iPhone as an integral part of their anatomy.

The main root cause underlying the Heroes' bad habits is **Ego Centricity – An inability to understand the world from the perspective of other people**. They have a difficulty getting outside their own frame of reference and seeing the world through another person's eyes. The void in their persona comes from lack of empathy. Heroes may choose to work seven days a week. That's their prerogative. But their expectations that others will have to follow suit lacks an appreciation of the other person's values, drives, and personal circumstances. This unnecessary coercion to comply burns out employees and destroys their morale.

The Hero is often the last person a manager wants to change. After all, why would you want to tamper with the behaviour of someone who gets more done in a day than anyone else does in a week? Yet, in the long-run, the Hero's constant push and drive adds real costs to the bottom line – even if those costs are obscured by short-term results. The Hero's trail is covered with the footprints of valuable employees who are burned-out, disillusioned, frustrated and demoralised – or good employees who simply could not take it anymore and simply left the company after trying to keep up with the Hero's superhuman efforts.

## Type #2: The Bulldozer

The second empty persona is the Bulldozer – Driven by need for power, they run roughshod over others in a quest for power. Bulldozers are people who decided early in life that the world is a hostile place where you should do unto others before they do unto you – plus interest, just to ensure that they get the message.

The Bulldozers are driven by 'Need for Power'. The inner action voice that drives them is 'Be Strong'. They cope with everything thrown their way. Their strengths are decisiveness, getting things done, firmness, and crisis management. Their weaknesses are lack of sensitivity, openness, and an ability to express passion and emotion.

Typically, the Bulldozers: --- Do not take prisoners --- Show willingness to make tough decisions and stand behind them --- Have an inflated self-importance --- Display control-freak tendencies – need to be on top of everything --- Detest and do not tolerate weakness, indecisiveness, and dependency --- Are independent-minded.

The underlying psychological process that causes the Bulldozer's bad habits is **a failure to recognise when and how to use power**. Most people feel a deep ambivalence about the use of power. These feelings stem from unconscious fears of our capacity for destructiveness. The Bulldozers are quite different. They are very clear and decisive about the use of power. They believe in 'use it or lose it'. They are all too happy to obtain power and then exercise it bluntly as if they were waving a club rather than skilfully and delicately as if they were using a surgeon's scalpel. The Bulldozers' lack of trust and fear of being cheated, taken advantage of, ignored, criticised, or treated unfairly causes them to fear that if they will not take control, others will control them.

While the Bulldozers deliver results, they do it with a great expense. Their pathway is littered with terrified and bullied employees. They intimidate and alienate everyone in their path. They don't trust others, and others don't trust them.

### **Type #3: The Rebel**

The Rebel, the third empty persona, automatically fights against authority and convention. Workplace rebels tend to be quite conventional in their knee-jerk reactions against the status quo. Even though they view themselves as radical and revolutionaries, most of their protests against "the system" don't go beyond simple complaining and moaning – they rarely take action to change the things that bother them.

The Rebels are driven by 'Need for Aggression'. Their rebellion is a form of passive aggressive act, where the aggression is hidden behind an over-righteous concern for the organisation.

Typically, Rebels: --- Argue for the sake of arguing --- Enjoy shocking colleagues with provocative statements --- Fancy themselves as independent thinkers --- Take a contrary point of view in a group situation --- Seem energised by getting into a heated argument --- Often clash with people in position of authority --- Always ask the inappropriate questions in meetings --- Constantly make jokes about the company's management --- Publicly question the motives behind any major change.

The psychological process that underlines the Rebel's bad habit is **a failure to come to terms with authority**. As in the case of using power, most people are ambivalent about authority – moving between the need to belong (being part of a larger entity) to the need to be unique. The third debilitating psychological process is being stuck in one of the extremes. At one end are those who defy authority in every possible instance and in every possible way. At the other end are those who are overly deferential: 'If top management says it's true, it must be'. The rebels are stuck in the first extreme.

The Rebels exhaust, tire, and wear-out their colleagues with their constant challenge, arguing, criticising, and moaning. There is something over-righteous about them that is unappealing and causes others avoid them. Their insistent criticism of the system, management, and anything else, drains the energy from others. When the Rebels are challenged, they become very defensive, try to build a coalition against the 'enemy', and by doing so, they create bad atmosphere in the workplace and a 'them and us' culture.

### **Type #4: The Pessimist**

The Pessimist focuses on the downside of every change; always worries about what could go wrong rather than considering how things could improve. **"We've always done it this way."** This is the way of the Pessimist, the fourth empty persona, to crush their colleagues' initiatives and keep the status quo. The Pessimists have nothing but the best intentions in mind. Their goal is to preserve the organisation from the harm that could come to it because

of ill-advised change. The problem is that Pessimists think that nearly every change is ill advised. While at times the Pessimists' worries are justified – more frequently, though, they simply stifle creativity and block fruitful opportunities.

Unlike the other types that are motivated by a specific need, the Pessimists are driven by fear of failure. They cannot tolerate the shame of being wrong or inadequate.

Typically, Pessimists tend to: --- Master the 'Yes-But' argument --- Display extremely cautious behaviour --- Spend more times analysing than any other type before committing to action --- Be highly indecisive --- Dislike making mistakes and focus on minimising them --- Be reluctant to speak up when disagreeing – Be extremely slow to make decisions.

The root cause underlying the Pessimists' bad habits is **a negative self-image**. The low esteem is a painful experience and results in attempts to prevent any likelihood for it to occur in the future. Consequently, they direct all their energy to avoidance of any situation that can result in failure.

The risk-averse nature of the Pessimist equates to paralysis by analysis – a debilitating indecisiveness that causes others enormous frustration. The avoidance of shame can spread insidiously throughout an organisation's culture, becoming an unconscious modus operandi that has disastrous results for the company's capacity to innovate and take risks. Creative, energetic, and change-driven employees find this type of environment suffocating, and they tend to vote with their feet – seeking a more dynamic and leading edge employer.

## Managing the Empty Personas

Changing the empty personas behaviour is a delicate matter. After all, you want them to continue to do all the good things they've been doing. At the same time, you have to let them know the implications of their behaviour in terms of the impact it has on the business's bottom line. That would come as a shock, as they see themselves as great contributors.

### The Hero

The Heroes are driven by activity – they like being busy and tend to fire fight. As such, they produce tremendous short-term results, but their long-term ones are neglected. The key to change the Heroes' behaviour is by focusing them on thinking more about winning the war and less about the individual battles. The Heroes are extremely competitive – therefore, giving them a challenge will focus their mind. The only difference is that the challenge will be articulated as a long-term strategic proposition, rather than an immediate issue that need to be resolved. A good General knows when to pull back to fight another day. Accordingly, you should reward the hero for actions that demonstrate a long-term focus and ignore or at least underplay any short-term achievements. Furthermore, express displeasure with any activities that are oriented towards short-term gains (e.g., fire-fighting, working silly hours, putting heroic efforts to complete proposals in time, etc.). Consider the following as an example of typical pep talk or a coaching conversation with a Hero –

*“You have proved yourself as an exceptional implementer – but to progress and gain the appreciation you deserve, you need to show the ability to operate at a higher level. Everyone is impressed and convinced by your dedication and ability to solve problems and handle crises, but where you haven't proved yourself, is with your ability to create and execute a well-thought through long-term strategic plan. Unless you will do that, you will be pigeon-holed as a fire-fighter or a crises manager. That might be a rewarding experience to start with, but for someone with your capabilities, it will not be enough. After a while you will get frustrated, seeing other overtaking you, as you haven't learn to adjust your ways...*

*Furthermore, the intensity in which you operate is costly both to yourself and others. I keep hearing continuous complaints about working long hours and weekends, and expecting others to do the same...*

*You are a high-achiever; here is a challenge for you. Try to achieve the same results working 8 hours a-day, five days a-week, instead of 70 hours a-week. I bet that you will find that it is possible. It is only a matter of focusing the mind. If you allow yourself 70 hours a week, you will fill the 70 hours with activities. However, if you know that you only have 40 working hours per week, you will become far more focus, effective and efficient. If you achieve that, your home life will improve, your productivity will increase, your thinking will be sharper and clearer, and your ability to see beyond the end of your nose will increase significantly – as for the first time you will have time to reflect..."*

## **The Bulldozer**

Bulldozers are often reluctant to change a style that in their eyes is highly effective. So to change a bulldozer, you have to demonstrate that on balance, the liabilities resulting from overall approach used by the Bulldozer outweigh the returns. Start the coaching conversation by asking the Bulldozer if s/he has any idea how many enemies s/he has created within the company. Follow this with a powerful line: 'If I put it to a vote, there's no question – you'd be fired.'

A bulldozer will typically protest – 'I haven't reached and achieved what I have by being soft and nice.' The right response is: "Look, I don't care if you think you're the gentlest person on earth. It doesn't even matter if I agree, because other people don't. And it's like being a stand-up comedian – if you think you're funny but the audience doesn't, you're not."

You need to be able to spell out the ins and outs of the cost of the Bulldozer's behaviour to the organisation.

*"We have eight people in the team. Each highly capable – yet, because of your approach, we don't utilise them hundred percent. If in a brainstorm, eighty percent of the ideas come from you – it is no indication that you are ever so clever, and the others operate a much lower level than yourself. It is merely because the others are either too scared to talk, or not given a chance as you bulldoze them. What it means in financial terms is that I might utilise you for hundred percent, but only get ten to twenty percent out of the capability of the others. That's not just a waste, this is economically unviable. It is a no brainer – it makes more sense to take you off the team and get the best out of seven people, that to have you, and have the others under-utilised..."*

*In the last couple of years, we lost three good people. What I gather from the exit interviews is that many blamed the atmosphere you have created in the work place as the cause for their departure. At the level in which they were operating the direct cost for replacing them (recruitment campaign, head hunter costs, etc.) is about thirty percent of their annual salary. The indirect cost associated with lost opportunities, time it takes the new recruit to reach an optimal performance level, disruption... is five time higher. So, your behaviour is costing me a fortune... I am not denying that you are giving us fantastic returns, but the cost of getting these returns is far too high... What would you do if you were in my position? ..."*

## **The Rebel**

Rebels enjoy most a game of tug of war. So the first tactic managing them is to turn things on their head. Instead of being the one who challenges, the Rebel is the one who is being

challenged. A typical coaching conversation with a Rebel could start with a blunt and direct question –

*“I have noticed that you tend to be very critical and challenging of the way we do things here. Are you happy here? Are you thinking of quitting? ... You always seem to be butting up against the limits, venting your frustration, and putting the organisation down... bad mouthing management...”*

*You say that this is just the way you are talking, or that you were just kidding around. I don't buy that. And in any event, the things you say hurt people and it is exasperating listening to the constant barrage of criticism.*

*But more to the point – you seem to think that a lot of things around here should be changed. Well here is a challenge for you – An opportunity to prove that there is substance behind your words. It is very easy to criticise, it is a different matter to offer a clever solution. If you're going to battle the counter-productive aspects of the 'regime', I want to see you coming out with a well thought through specific initiative or a plan of action, rather than taking the easy option of standing on the side lines and criticising. You can then present it to the Board, and be prepared to be challenged about it. So think it through very well and be ready to defend it. You will need to convince your audience that the benefits of adopting your initiative outweigh the costs implementing it.*

*You have a choice. You can work to change things here or you can follow you old pattern and just be an irritant. If you choose the later, your career will stall and your influence on the organisation will never amount to much. I hope you make the other choice, because you're right – this place isn't perfect, and we need people like you to help improve it.”*

## **The Pessimist**

Like the Rebel's constant criticism, the Pessimist constant resistance to change, can be irksome, annoying, and exasperating. After a while, people stop taking notice, and treat the Rebel or the Pessimist as irritating noise in the background. This is the line of argument to take in the coaching conversation with the Pessimist. Pointing out that as in the children's story of the boy who cried wolf, the impact of the constant alarms is diminishing.

*“It is okay to worry, but it's important that your fears do more than guard the status quo. They should have a constructive edge.*

*I have been listening to your arguments closely over the last couple of months, and the pattern that emerged for me is that your risk evaluation is biased. You ignore both the potential upside of change, as well as failing to consider the downside of doing nothing.*

*In the future, when a change initiative is proposed, you should draw a two-by-two matrix that looks at the pros and cons of making the change as well as the pros and cons of doing nothing. By making this systematic consideration of initiatives into a routine, you will be forced into more objective risk analysis... Furthermore, I am willing to protect you from every kind of risk except one. If you try something new and fail, I'll take the blame. If you try something new and succeed, you'll get the credit. But if I find that you're refusing to take risks or getting in the way of others who have good ideas, you'll be held accountable.”*

## References

Waldrop, J. & Butler, T. (2000). Managing away bad habits. *Harvard Business Review*, 78, no. 5 (September – October).

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