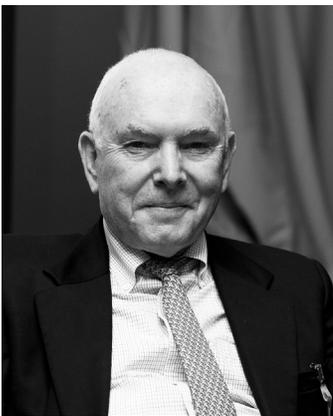


# REFLECTIONS ON THE DARK SIDE

BY DR. ROBERT HOGAN

THE CONCEPT OF THE DARK SIDE SEEMS TO HAVE ACQUIRED A LIFE OF ITS OWN, BUT ITS REAL IMPORTANCE CONCERNS THE FACT THAT IT PROVIDES A VITAL LINK BETWEEN PERSONALITY, LEADERSHIP, AND TEAM PERFORMANCE.



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In 1990 I published a paper on *The Dark Side of Charisma*, and after that the dark side trope seems to have taken off. People outside academic psychology might not realize how radical the dark side concept actually is – 25 years ago, researchers thought personality was irrelevant, and 15 years ago, mainstream opinion regarded leadership as fiction. Due to the popularity of the dark side, the concept seems to

have acquired a life of its own, but its real importance concerns the fact that it provides a vital link between personality, leadership, and team performance. Taking the dark side seriously means taking personality and leadership seriously.

In the early 1980s I reviewed the empirical research on effective leadership and found no consensus regarding how to define competent leadership (which is still

the case). Taking a page from Freud's notebook, I asked, "What about bad leadership?" After a bit of data snooping, I concluded that the base rate for incompetent leadership is 65% to 75%; this differed dramatically from professional estimates of 3% to 5%, but is roughly proportional to the levels of employee disengagement (or alienation) of approximately 75% that we regularly see in climate survey results.

My friend V. Jon Bentz was vice president of Human Resources at Sears in the 1960s; after he retired he wrote a summary of his experience. He hired new managers at Sears using well-validated measures of mental competence and normal personality to ensure that the new managers were smart and had good social skills. He followed the new managers over time, which resulted in two important findings. First, about two thirds of them were fired, which is consistent with my estimate of the base rate of managerial incompetence. Second, Bentz developed a taxonomy of the reasons why his managers failed, and it closely resembled the eleven DSM IV personality disorders as they were defined at the time. Bentz' memoir launched my dark side research.

Bentz' findings raise an important question: why did two thirds of his new managers fail when they looked so good in the hiring process? Taking a clue from Erving Goffman's distinction

the influence of chemical substances, or when they are simply being themselves. The dark side often emerges when individuals are dealing with someone whom they perceive as having a lesser status than they do – such as subordinate employees. The bright side represents maximal performance whereas the dark side represents typical performance. People move continuously and unconsciously back and forth between the two sides of personality. In essence, the bright side reflects faking and the dark side represents the real person. As Freud would say, however, the real person is usually something to be avoided.

Please note two additional points about the dark side. First, it doesn't refer to hidden psychic desires that suddenly emerge under potentiating circumstances (like a full moon). Rather, the dark side refers to how people behave when they are not paying attention. Second, most people are unaware of how

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between front and back stage behavior, I used the term *bright side* to refer to people's performance when they are on stage and mindful of how others perceive them. I used the term *dark side* to refer to people's performance when they are back stage and indifferent to how others perceive them. I then proposed that the so-called Big Five dimensions of normal personality are a taxonomy of the bright side, and that Bentz' had provided a taxonomy of the dark side.

The bright side of personality describes people's performance when they are paying attention to the normal rules of self-presentation, when they are controlling the way others perceive them and, therefore, trying to create a good impression. The dark side describes people's behavior when they are not paying attention and/or don't care about creating a good impression; this happens when they are emotionally upset, when they are stressed or ill, when they are under

they behave when they are just being themselves. In this sense, therefore, the dark side really is unconscious – because it is outside conscious awareness. But the secrets of the dark side are readily accessible because they are captured by a person's reputation – other people can tell you about your dark side. What you do with that information is up to you.

Together the bright side and dark side behaviors create a person's reputation. So it is worth noting three features of reputation: (1) reputations emerge early and are quite stable over long periods of time; (2) the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior, reputations summarize past behavior, so reputations are the best data source we have to predict behavior; and (3) reputation forms the basis of everything that happens to us in life—people hire us, fire us, and loan us money based on our reputations. Smart players in the game of life take very good care of their reputations. Not so



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smart people are not as good at the care and feeding of their reputations.

Leadership is typically defined in terms of the people in charge. This is a mistake because climbing to the top of an organizational hierarchy is often more about politics than leadership. I define leadership as the ability to bring people together to work successfully toward a common purpose. That is, leadership is about building and maintaining a high performing team and leadership should be evaluated in terms of the performance of the team.

*Real Managers*, written by Fred Luthans in 1988 dramatizes the distinction between leaders as high status organizational players and leaders as people who build high performing teams. Luthans followed a diverse sample of 457 managers in a massive study. After four years he defined two groups: (1) those who received rapid promotions and pay raises; and (2) those whose teams performed well. Based on careful behavioral observations, Luthans found that the first group (emergent managers) spent their time networking and playing

politics, whereas the second group (effective managers) spent their time building their teams. He reports that only 10% of these two groups overlapped. This distinction between emergent and effective managers is important and supports the view that the high flyers in an organization may have more talent for politics than for leadership.

I can now put this discussion of the dark side in its proper context. First, as with everything important in personality, there is good news and bad news regarding the dark side. We think

about the dark side in terms of 11 themes derived from Bentz' research concerning managerial derailment. Curiously, each of these derailment themes contains elements that contribute to leader emergence, the ability to rise in an organization. For example, persons characterized as Excitable act with passion and enthusiasm, Reserved people are implacable under pressure, and Dutiful people are excellent organizational citizens. Consequently, although dark side behaviors ultimately will get managers fired, they also contribute to emergence – which is why

### DARK SIDE THEMES

**Excitable:** Passionate, intense, and volatile

**Skeptical:** Insightful, critical, and suspicious

**Cautious:** Careful, conservative, and risk averse

**Reserved:** Tough, aloof, and private

**Leisurely:** Overtly pleasant and cooperative; privately stubborn and independent

**Bold:** Charismatic, arrogant, and self-promoting

**Mischievous:** Charming, smart, and limit testing

**Colorful:** Socially skilled, entertaining, and impulsive

**Imaginative:** Creative, innovative, and eccentric

**Diligent:** Hard working, perfectionistic, micro-manager

**Dutiful:** Conforming, compliant, excessively respectful of authority

they exist in the first place. Too much dark side and you are likely to get fired; too little dark side and you are likely to get overlooked.

Second, the problem with dark side behaviors is that, in leaders, they erode and/or destroy subordinates' trust. Dark side behaviors help managers emerge, but degrade their credibility with subordinates. Subordinates' ratings of how much they trust their managers are a proxy for team performance; ratings of trust are the best single estimate we have of potential team performance. Dark side behaviors are often good for managers' emergence but bad for their performance as leaders. Finally, then, as noted above, the importance of the concept of the dark side is that it links personality with leadership and team or organizational performance.

In the 1960s Frederick Herzberg analyzed work motivation in terms of motivating factors and hygiene factors. Motivating factors are somewhat vague, but in principle they serve to enhance individual performance. Hygiene factors are motivational elements in the workplace (e.g., noise, dirt, heat, cold, bad pay) that degrade employee performance and a proper goal of enlightened management is to remove hygiene factors to the degree that it is possible to do so. In my view,

the most important hygiene factor in any organization is bad managers. Every employed adult reports having spent some significant time working for an intolerable boss; employees report being willing to take pay cuts if someone will fire their managers. Bad management costs organizations billions of dollars in lost revenue each year. Why are so many bad managers hired? Because when they are being hired, these managers display only the bright side. The dark side comes out when they are dealing with their subordinates, and that is when the trouble starts.

Can people change their personalities and lighten up their dark sides? The answer is, in principle yes, but subject to three considerations. First, the part of their personality that needs to be changed is not how they think about themselves, it is not dark memories buried in their psyches. The part of personality that needs to be changed is their reputation and it takes a lot of work for people to change their reputations. Second, people can only change their reputation if they have accurate feedback regarding how others perceive them. Finally, people must be coachable – they must be willing to listen to feedback and then willing to act on it. Without this willingness, there may be no light at the end of the dark side tunnel.

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