

# Promoting Dr Jekyll

## – ending up with Mr Hyde

**Professor Ivan Robertson looks at the dark side of personality, when positive traits become troublesome and disruptive to the organisation**

Last month I looked at the role that personality plays in determining how we behave at work and talked about the positive personality characteristics that employers look for in employees, which can predict successful job performance. This month I want look at another side of personality – which has been referred to by Hogan and Kaiser (2005) as “the dark side”.

Most employers tend to look for people with characteristics at the positive end of the key personality factors – for example, people who are outgoing (high extraversion), emotionally stable (low neuroticism) and open to experience. And it’s easy to understand why a socially confident, persuasive and determined graduate entering an organisation is likely to be noticed – this is often just the type of ambitious employee who might get fast-streamed.

The dark side comes into play when traits that are initially seen as very positive become troublesome and unhelpful. One example of this occurs when what appears to be confidence and ambition in the early days actually turns out to be arrogance and competitiveness. This can be particularly serious when flawed individuals with some severe negative traits get into senior leadership roles that carry significant responsibilities. Unfortunately, it is not always easy to spot people with these kinds of negative personality characteristics early on.



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Organisations will tolerate or not even notice negative traits early in a person’s career – but when that person reaches a position of power and influence the negative traits drive behaviour and organisational outcomes that cannot be ignored.

Research I carried out on managers a few years ago looked at the extent to which people who were seen as good managers reported high levels of conscientiousness (one of the key personality factors). We found that when performance in their current job was the focus, managers reporting high levels of conscientiousness were judged to be better – but interestingly, the managers who were judged by their bosses to be more promotable reported higher levels of extraversion than conscientiousness. The extrovert managers were good at networking and building relationships – which was helping to enhance their careers while the conscientious managers had their heads down doing a good job!

The importance of how organisations frame and interpret employees’ behaviour at different stages of their careers is the key issue here. For example, mood swings early on in an outgoing, enthusiastic and intelligent person might be seen as passion or commitment, but later on the same behaviour may be seen as inconsistent and disruptive in a way that starts to affect important outcomes for the organisation. It is actually quite common to see the very same characteristics that contribute to a person’s progress through an organisation (if they are extreme) producing negative behavioural and organisational outcomes like high turnover, poor morale, stress-related absence and poor productivity further down the line. This is because the characteristics that help people to rise rapidly at the start of their careers are not necessarily those that are required to thrive when a person gets higher up the organisation.

Developing this theme of distinguishing between the emergence and the effectiveness of leaders, I’d like to look at the personality factor of agreeableness – another of the five key factors of personality. People with high levels of agreeableness tend to be compassionate, friendly and cooperative. Research into personality and leadership has revealed that agreeableness is the only one of the big five personality factors that does not predict leadership emergence. However, the research also shows that to be effective when you actually become a leader high levels of agreeableness are very important because the behaviour associated with it helps to build trust and good personal relationships. The implication here is that people with low levels of agreeableness regularly make it into the leadership group, but once they get there the



fact that they do not have this important characteristic affects the performance of the person themselves, their team and ultimately the organisation.

Maverick personalities or a dysfunctional mix within management teams can be extremely disruptive for an organisation – and vast experience combined with high levels of technical knowledge is no antidote to the problems that arise. This outcome is not inevitable, of course – the best fast-track and leadership development programmes look at personality and help cohorts to understand their own in a way that enables them to manage and flex their behaviour as the situation demands. They provide a safe opportunity to explore the implications of the different aspects of personality and to discuss this with people who are going through the same process. Equally, good recruitment processes use assessment centres to provide a balanced mix of biodata, personality and ability tests, as well as face-to-face interviews and work sample tests.

Personality is a rich area for organisations and not only in the here-and-now of recruitment. The decisions that are made today have an effect on the long-term personality profile of the business – creating either a timebomb of talent or one of a more destructive nature. The best organisations use their experience to predict how the kinds of personalities that they are recruiting today can and should develop and invest appropriately in the development of their staff to make this vision a reality.