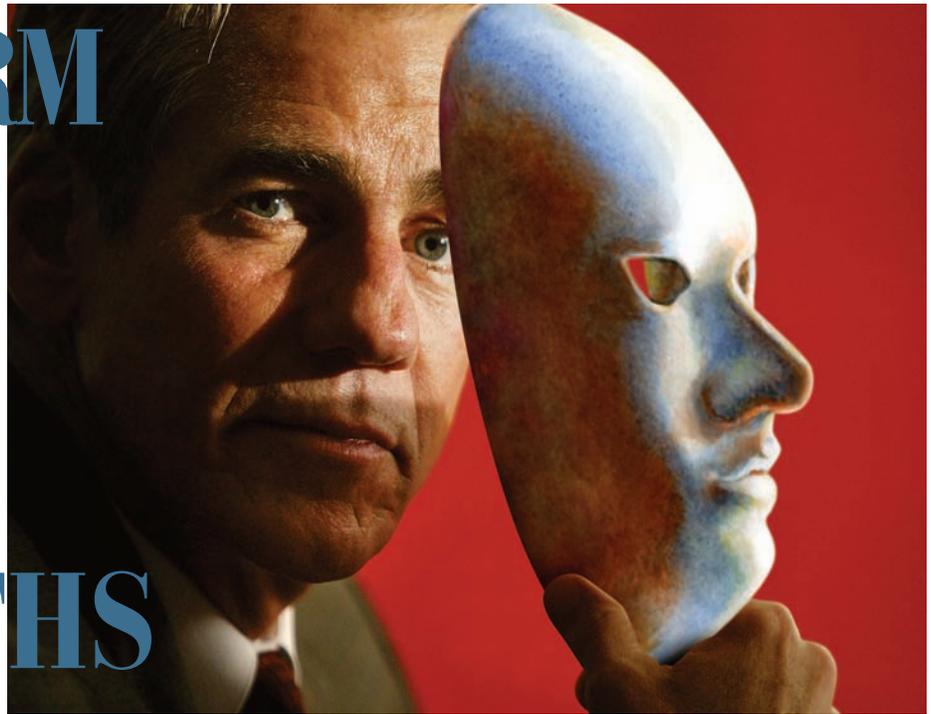


# EXPLORING THE DARK SIDE: WHEN FIRM LEADERS OVERUSE THEIR STRENGTHS



In my article *Malignant Leadership*, I talked about the merits of psychological evaluations and about how “increasing stress, work overload, fatigue, high emotion, and lack of social vigilance can increase the probability of malignant leadership.” I referenced a useful psychometric instrument, developed by Hogan Assessments, that can “detect leaders who are likely to derail.” What is most intriguing, I said, was how leaders can exhibit a “Dark Side that is simply the result of them using their strengths to an extreme.”

For some time now, we have all been strongly encouraged to focus on developing our strengths rather than gravitating to working on weaknesses. Conventional wisdom in leadership and the late Peter Drucker constantly advised executives to build on their strengths. This seemingly straightforward advice is complicated by Drucker’s own observation that, “Most people *think* they know what they are good at . . . and they are usually wrong.”

Ironically, the line between a strength and weakness isn’t always clear. Consider: if, as a leader, I am a really good speaker, when I want to influence my partners,

what am I most likely to do? Attempt to speak passionately, go on at length, perhaps even turn up the volume. What might I forget to do? Listen. Since, in the moment, I cannot do both, when I lean on my speaking capability too much, especially in an unfamiliar situation, at the wrong times, or when I am particularly anxious, it may actually transform that strength into a crippling weakness.

There is now significant evidence to show all leaders, whether at a firm or practice group level, are susceptible to overusing their strengths. Your natural desire to be forceful and forthright can, under pressure, become perceived to be abusive and authoritative. Your operating preference to always seek consensus can drift into periods of protracted indecision. The desire to dramatically improve performance and the firm’s profitability can incite a preoccupation for short-term expediency.

No matter how magnetic, impactful, or authentic your leadership style, you have a dark side – a kind of shadow that follows you around, lurking in the peripheral, with the potential to emerge in times of stress, difficulty, novelty, or boredom. Self-awareness

is the best preventative medicine for maintaining strengths while avoiding the over-reliance or over-use that can turn them into a liability.

One of the most scientifically validated and reliable tools to assist firm leaders to become more self-aware, was developed by noted psychologist, Dr. Robert Hogan. The Hogan Development Survey (HDS) is a measure of 11 personality characteristics known as the “Dark Side” and is the only instrument available that assesses a leader’s preference toward derailing behaviors in times of stress and uncertainty. These 11 different characteristics, would under normal circumstances be considered strengths, but Dark Side temperament describes people when they are facing adversity, boredom or simply not paying sufficient attention to their leadership comportment.

As an integral part of our First 100 Days program for new firm leaders, we acquired firsthand exposure to the performance anxieties of over 50 new firm leaders, conducted in-depth assessments of their personalities and working styles, and helped each look into the mirror and examine how their individual strengths could potentially work against them. At

the very least, data from this survey affords new firm leaders the opportunity for deep personal insight, which provides for taking action on how to avoid self-defeating behaviors.

#### SELF-DEFEATING BEHAVIORS

Here is a brief peek at Hogan's definition of the 11 most common strengths that can become weaknesses under pressure:

**Strength: Excitable** – Great capacity for empathy; tends to exhibit enthusiasm about ideas and people and works hard on new projects

**When under stress:** Leader can lack persistence, requires constant reassurance as easily becomes disappointed with initiatives, displays moodiness, is hard to please, sensitive to any criticism and prone to exhibiting volatile emotional displays

**Strength: Skeptical** – Bright, thoughtful, perceptive, tends to be socially insightful, and a great navigator of firm politics

**When under stress:** Leader seems to lack trust, acts with suspicion, is cynical, distrustful and quick to doubt others' intentions; alert to signs of mistreatment and will retaliate when finding it.

**Strength: Cautious** – Meticulous at evaluating risks; tends to be prudent, careful and conscientious

**When under stress:** Leader avoids innovation, is unwilling to take risks or offer opinions, becomes reactive rather than proactive; seems resistant to change, sometimes paralyzed by a fear of failure.

**Strength: Reserved** – Tough in the face of adversity; can take criticism and tends to stay focused; independent and comfortable working alone on projects

**When under stress:** Leader can seem aloof, rude, uncommunicative, detached and insensitive to the needs and feelings of others.

**Strength: Leisurely** – Good social skills, clever at hiding their feelings; tends to be very agreeable

and pleasant to work with, confident about their own skills and abilities.

**When under stress:** Leader becomes cynical of others' skills and abilities, is passive-aggressive, tends toward procrastination, becoming resistant to feedback, stubborn, and resentful of interruptions.

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**Strength: Bold** – Liked, admired, charismatic; tends to be highly ambitious, energetically taking initiative and expecting success.

**When under stress:** Leader shows arrogance, acts as though he is entitled with inflated views of self-worth, is self-absorbed, and unwilling to admit any mistakes or share credit.

**Strength: Mischievous** – Is exceedingly charming and friendly; tends to handle heavy workloads well

**When under stress:** Leader becomes manipulative, impulsive, reckless, seeks excitement, and thereby prone to taking ill-advised risks; has problems maintaining commitment and learning from experience.

**Strength: Colorful** – Has flair, presence; tends to be expressive, engaging, lively and fun; naturally good at sales.

**When under stress:** Leader is overly dramatic, attention-seeking and highly disorganized; prone to making dramatic entrances, seems preoccupied with being noticed and may lack the ability to

listen and maintain a consistent focus.

**Strength: Imaginative** – Constantly alert to new ways of seeing things and enjoys entertaining others with new ideas; tends to be creative; an innovative thinker, and insightful about others' motives.

**When under stress:** Leader act and communicate in unusual or eccentric ways, often lacking sound judgment and indifferent to the consequences; can be impractical and idiosyncratic, confusing others by constantly changing their minds.

**Strength: Diligent** – Hard working, concerned with doing a good job; tends to set high standards for self and others and is careful and meticulous, reliably detail oriented.

**When under stress:** Leader becomes a perfectionist, irritated when rules are not followed, disempowers others by micro-managing everything and is hypercritical; poor at delegating and they becomes a bottleneck to productivity because everything must pass through them.

**Strength: Dutiful** – Loyal, cordial and polite; tends to conform, make few enemies, and is eager to please.

**When under stress:** Leader is deeply concerned with being accepted, alert for signs of disapproval; becoming indecisive, reliant on others for guidance and reluctant to act independently or go against popular opinion, thus staff may feel unsupported.

As we understand more about ourselves, we gain perspective about why some environments, situations and organizational cultures are opportunities for us to thrive, feel stifled or encounter significant stress. Moreover, we can begin to understand why.

#### LEADING WITH A BLIND SPOT

It is important to understand that Dark Side personality characteristics are not automatically problematic. Most people have some combination of vulnerabilities, and some are remarkably self-aware and able to moderate their behavior under stress; which is key. In a 2006 study of successful Australian CEOs,

Hogan found that every CEO had a dark side factor that needed to be managed. Thus the Dark Side is a double-edged sword, motivating exceptional levels of capability but also potentially leading to counterproductive behavior in the unprepared leader.

What becomes interesting from our research is that we have thus far had over 50 new firm leaders complete a Hogan HDS Survey – 42% hailing from AmLaw 100 and 200 firms and the remainder from firms of, almost always, over 100 attorneys in size. Our subsequent analysis of these completed surveys shows that 77.5% of all new firm leaders tested, rated “High Risk” on at least one of these 11 different scales; and 22.5% (or nearly one in four) rated “High Risk” on three or more of these 11 scales.

Digging deeper, we found that one particular Dark Side dimension was more pronounced than any other, by twice the scores amongst this group of firm leaders. That dimension is known as **Excitability** – which accounted for 25% of the firm leaders testing “High Risk” (90 Percentile) and another 37.5% testing “Moderate Risk” (70 to 90 Percentile) for a total of 62.5% or nearly two out of three leaders displaying this attribute as a strength, that is prone to overuse.

Now, an argument can be proffered that Excitability is one of the qualifications for being a capable firm leader. Most of the time these leaders use this strength to purposefully direct enthusiasm and draw attention to issues of importance and also to demonstrate their support for a particular undertaking. Excitable firm leaders vibrate with energy, command attention and respect, motivating and inspiring those around them in ways that can be contagious throughout the firm. We tend to discount their occasional bad-tempered outbursts as a natural reaction to a high-stress job filled with complex challenges.

Excitable leaders aren’t at risk because they may fly off the handle now and then. The problem begins

where one week you are incredibly optimistic about an undertaking and speak eloquently and convincingly about how all of your partners should be supportive, only the next week to find you gloomy and disheartened that the project still isn’t off the ground or progressing as quickly as hoped – very often because as the leader you have “launched” a

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new initiative and then delegated it to others to follow through on, causing many of your partners to wonder whether it was really important or simply the latest fad. Excitable leaders are prone to becoming easily disappointed and when disappointed their first instinct is to withdraw and to leave.

This scale concerns the tendency to develop strong enthusiasms about new projects or relationships, perhaps even to idealize them, then to discover flaws or shortcomings in the idealized object and to become disillusioned, discouraged, and upset. Leaders with high-risk scores tend to let little things bother them, become annoyed easily, and change their focus and their priorities more frequently. Highly Excitable leaders don’t always see how their volatility can seriously impact their effectiveness; thus it becomes a destructive blind spot for them. Imagine working with a leader who:

- moves back and forth between optimistic and

pessimistic stances, between encouraging a project and then acting agitated that it’s not progressing quickly enough;

- through his messages and actions generates enthusiasm one day and intimidation the next, such that people start holding back news about missed commitments or unexpected events;

- explodes over minor missteps or for reasons he can’t fully articulate, resulting in people avoiding certain topics, cutting off his information flow and returning phone calls with well-rehearsed answers; and

- has colleagues whispering about how they are never quite sure who precisely is going to show up in his office from one day to the next, and consulting with the secretary for a weather report before entering his office.

Although the most obvious symptom to others of Excitability overused is the leader’s frequent mood swings, it probably isn’t the

most obvious to those inflicted. What may look like a dramatic change of mind or mood swing to others, feels to you like simply a normal reaction to the stress of leadership. This is what Hogan refers to as leadership derailment, wherein our personality characteristics betray us, degrade our success, and generally send us on a fast train to nowhere. Our shadow is particularly dangerous because it tends to lie beyond the reach of our awareness, but is highly apparent to those around us.

Are you aware of your strengths and how to use them to your advantage without overusing them?

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO MITIGATE YOUR DARK SIDE

**F**irm leaders who become aware of their ‘Dark Side’ tendencies can initiate actions to minimize their disruptive influences. Here are a few examples:

### 1. Be attuned to your blind spots.

Examine (in quiet reflection) specifically where you pride yourself on being better than other leaders (past or present) in any way. You have now identified the one single attribute that you are usually at greatest risk of overusing.

### 2. Have a system for gathering truthful feedback.

Most of us, as human beings, have defensive egos that do a phenomenal job of protecting us from the truth, as do the people around us who shield us from the painful reality that we are not perfect. We receive feedback from peers in the form of sugar-coated rubber bullets that contain a shred of truth, but do little to help us become truly self-aware.

Create a real-time feedback process. For example, at the conclusion of one of the meetings you chair, ask “what issues may we yet need to explore more adequately?” At the end of a one-on-one meeting with one of your partners, ask “in which areas would you like to see more support from me?” At the conclusion of one of your meetings with a practice group leader, ask “Have I fully understood and appreciated the issues that your team is grappling with and what else would it be important for me to understand?”

Work with your colleagues to assess where your strengths get in the way. Ask your closest advisors to help you by answering a few questions:

- When you sense that I'm in stress, what do you see me do that you think is counter-productive?
- When you get together with other partners and someone complains about me, what do they complain about?
- How do I force you to work around me rather than with me?
- What do I do that makes you crazy?
- Do you have any suggestions for me on how I might better align my intent with my impact?
- What alternative leadership styles should/could I explore to achieve what I want to achieve?

### 3. Identify the circumstances that cause you to over-react.

Whether it's boredom or too much work; failure of an initiative for which you are accountable to having to confront an underperforming partner – you need to determine what kinds of environments, events, problems and decisions ratchet up your personal stress levels. Are there certain types of situations or people that bring out your dark side?

For example, George, a charismatic and very confident managing partner, had earned the (hallway whispered) nickname “chief black cloud.” This was largely due to his automatic tendency to frequently reject some new idea that was presented, before even hearing it out. To help control this derailing behavior, George decided to anticipate, on his calendar, the kinds of meetings where this was likely to happen and to resist the impulse to revert to form. Instead of categorically rejecting a new idea, George asked people to clarify their reasoning or data. This led to a healthy form of dialogue and more of a shared understanding about which new ideas could work and which might not.

Knowing when you are more likely to act up or act out allows you to be aware of your triggers. Being aware of those triggers allows you to monitor what kinds of circumstances can lead you to becoming most vulnerable.

### 4. Learn to take a step back

When under stress, taking a moment for reflection can cool you down before you over-react. You must force yourself to consciously step away from your stress-induced interpersonal reaction to people or events.

The most successful leaders often explore how their strengths might be perceived by reflecting upon and asking of others- what should I stop doing? Peter Drucker once said, “*We spend a lot of time teaching leaders what to do. We don't spend*

*enough time teaching leaders what to stop. Half of the leaders I have met don't need to learn what to do as much as they need to learn what to stop.*”

Here is an exercise worth considering. Get out your note pad and instead of the usual ‘To Do’ list, not a few items for your ‘To Stop’ list. For example, when some colleague offers a less-than-brilliant idea in a meeting, don't criticize it – say: nothing! When someone offers you a helpful suggestion, don't remind them that you already knew that – say, “Thank You!” When some partner challenges one of your decisions, don't argue with them or make excuses – Say: “I will certainly consider it!”

### 5. Find your personal ‘Sanctuary.’

Leaders can often benefit from finding a ‘sanctuary.’ That is not necessarily a physical place, but more a mental retreat. Firm leaders have often spoken about the benefit of continuing their routine luncheon with a close friend, the merits of reading some inspirational materials; purposely going to the gym for an intense workout; or even meditating – some activity that provides a much needed interruption from the daily pressures.

### 6. Empower a trusted advisor to give you an alert.

You need to pay attention to your impact on others. And for a confident to be effective in helping you, you need to reveal some of your vulnerabilities. You need to establish an implicit contract with a close colleague who can give you honest feedback and even intervene when you're getting yourself in trouble, without worrying about repercussions.

Alexandre Dumas once wrote, “Any virtue carried to an extreme can become a crime.” And so it is with our strengths. Take the time to assess your strengths and make sure that they are helping, not hindering your success through overuse. Self-awareness, and feedback can help you manage your strengths in a way that allows you to develop a balanced approach in how you deploy those strengths in a manner that delivers maximum results.