Personalities at Work: Understanding and Managing Human Nature on the Job

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Personality traits, types and disorders powerfully influence human relations at work. In many cases, these dynamics can be crucial to the success or failure of public or private organizations and administrations. If nothing else, we would all like to know how to get along better with the people we work with. This paper describes the main diagnostic classifications of personality types and personality disorders with specific reference to their expression in employees' behavior. Practical guidelines are offered for managing employee personality styles in order to achieve maximal person-job fit and the most productive working relationships possible.

All people possess personality traits. These are the individual variations of temperament, cognition and interaction style that give each of us our distinct "color" as human beings. But when these personal characteristics grate harmfully on others or significantly derail the success of the persons themselves, psychologists regard them not just as personality traits, but also as personality disorders. 1 2 The official diagnostic definition of a personality disorder is "an enduring pattern of inner experience and behavior that deviates markedly from the expectations of the individual's culture, is pervasive and inflexible, has an onset in adolescence or early adulthood, is stable over time and leads to distress or impairment."3

Personality-disordered individuals typically have little insight into their own behavior or understanding of the adverse impact they have on themselves and others. They characteristically justify their offensive or self-defeating behavior patterns as being due to uncontrollable fate or to the fault of someone else. It is the extremes of their self-perception and conduct toward others that distinguish personality-disordered individuals from those with milder traits. More practically, in the workplace, people with personality disorders can cause considerable difficulty for both the organization and themselves.4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

However, because personality-disordered individuals may also be talented and productive in other aspects of their work, their more dysfunctional behaviors may be tolerated in the workplace, or coworkers and supervisors may even exploit them. In
fact, people gravitate toward different kinds of jobs based not only on their training and intellectual skills, but also on the basis of their personalities, temperaments and cognitive styles.\textsuperscript{13} \textsuperscript{14} In the ideal case, individuals with personality disorders, unless extremely severe, may eventually burrow into their own comfortable niche in the organization and operate effectively until something changes in the work environment that destabilizes their position or performance.

The purpose of the present discussion is to provide business managers and their consultants with some insight into the minds of the people they work with, and to suggest some strategies for maximizing the relationship among workers in a job environment. Personalities may not be easy to change, but they often can be accommodated, and a seemingly obstreperous or hopeless employee may be salvageable if you know how to play to his or her strengths and minimize or overcome his or her interpersonal and job-related weaknesses.

In this discussion, the border between a personality trait or style and a disorder per se is deliberately kept open in order to emphasize that in most cases this is really a continuum, instead of a rigid demarcation. Another loose set of borders is among the personalities themselves. It is common for people to have mixtures of personality traits or disorders, for example, the Dependent personality who’s craving for approval expresses itself through Obsessive-Compulsive devotion to details for her boss, or the Paranoid personality who’s suspicion about being undermined by jealous coworkers manifests itself in Histrionic displays of disciplinary wrath. Each of the personality types discussed below will be treated as if they are “pure” types, but again, bear in mind that these are abstractions, and you may not find such neat diagnostic categories in your workplace. People are complex.

**Avoidant Personality**

**Clinical Description and Work Style**

Avoidant personality is a pattern of social inhibition, feelings of inadequacy and hypersensitivity to negative evaluation or criticism. Even relatively neutral or potentially pleasant interpersonal interactions are approached with trepidation, and any sort of direct confrontation is out of the question. These are people who fear people. They are not antisocial per se, and may actually be very polite and accommodating in demeanor. Many secretly long for some form of human companionship that, at the same time, they are fearful of pursuing. Thus, they are very lonely people. They are rarely rejected outright from social groups, but are more likely to be simply “left out.” They may develop a small number of close friendships with peers who are non-threatening and nondemanding, and they possess the basic capacity for empathy and human connection, if their pervasive shyness can be overcome.

Because of their fear of social interactions, Avoidants are usually at a distinct disadvantage in job roles that require entrepreneurial “people skills.” If they feel particularly threatened, they may avoid work altogether, calling in sick or unexpectedly not showing up. Extreme social phobia also carries the risk of substance abuse as self-
medication, but serious addiction problems tend to be less of a problem with Avoidants than with other personality types. They may however, be prone to somatizing their distress in the form of “psychosomatic” illnesses or “job stress.” In general, however, their conscientiousness and eagerness to please make them reliable and compliant workers, even if they don’t show great independence and initiative.

Management Strategies

Give him a task to do, keep the supervision brief and positive, let him stay out of the spotlight, and the Avoidant employee will probably be a reliable and faithful worker. Obviously, few jobs allow workers to be total hermits, but if the position calls for good technical, clerical, mechanical or physical skills, without much need for regular human contact, the Avoidant employee will probably do a good job. In general, Avoidants tend to gravitate toward relatively obscure, low-level occupational roles in which there is little need to interact with others. A well-defined work situation with minimal interpersonal contact can be compatible with this personality type, and under such conditions, they tend to make very stable and reliant workers.

Most jobs, however, require some kind of periodic supervision. Remember, the Avoidant personality is not antisocial, just intimidated by people, especially authority figures. So keep the supervision light, more in line with a coaching and counseling approach, rather than as criticism or discipline per se. Of course, if the Avoidant consistently fails to perform up to par, and won’t respond to gentle encouragement, you may have to be more forceful. If he can’t tolerate appropriate constructive criticism, he will eventually just leave the company.

Dependent Personality

Clinical Description and Work Style

Dependent personality is a pattern of submissive and clinging behavior stemming from an excessive need to be taken care of. Whereas Avoidants fear people and prefer to be away from them, Dependents desperately need people and fear only their rejection or loss of support. Dependent personalities look to others to provide guidance and direction and are ready-made followers. As such, they may be dedicated employees, as long as independent decision-making is kept to a minimum. Work interactions are apt to be taken more personally than with other employees, as Dependents look to positive feedback for validation of their essential worthiness as human beings. As such, their feelings are easily hurt, even by seemingly neutral or innocuous constructive criticism, but they are far less likely to nurse a grudge than the Narcissistic, Paranoid or Borderline worker.

Overdependence on validation from others, hypersensitivity to slights and rejections and overreaction to real or imagined criticism may combine to make the Dependent worker the subject of much unnecessary stress and strain on the job. This anxiety may cause her to overfocus on the impression her performance will make on others rather than on the particulars of the assignment itself. Once ensconced in a relative-
ly secure position, any threatened loss of a job may seem like the end of the world and send the Dependent employee into a deep depression. Otherwise, her tireless devotion to sources of validation may make her among the most loyal of employees.

**Management Strategies**

It might seem that her need for approval and eagerness to please would make the Dependent personality the ideal assistant or subordinate, and for simple, well-structured tasks this may be true. The problem arises when the Dependent employee has to take any kind of initiative or make an independent decision. Initially gratified by the new employee’s eagerness to learn, managers may later become irritated by the Dependent’s seemingly endless quest for reassurance. Coaching and counseling such employees is at first rewarding, as they appear to eagerly soak up every recommendation. After a while however, managers may feel, “Enough is enough — can’t she do anything without me holding her hand?” Other employees may resent the extra attention the Dependent gets, while at the same time growing tired of her constant queries for direction and reassurance.

However, if you are able to provide a low-stress, progressive type of corrective supervision that gradually helps the Dependent employee master the tasks she needs — and if you can keep the emphasis on complimenting the good behavior, rather than criticizing the bad — the Dependent employee may eventually feel secure enough in the work relationship to do a really great job. Remember: Dependent personalities truly want to do well; approval is their greatest reinforcer. If you can train her carefully and dose your approval accordingly, you may have a loyal, competent and stable employee.

**Obsessive-Compulsive Personality**

**Clinical Description and Work Style**

The Obsessive-Compulsive personality is preoccupied with orderliness, perfectionism and control. In milder forms, these individuals make excellent detail persons who can be relied upon to carry out instructions to the letter and beyond. At worst, they can become so immersed in minutiae that they miss the proverbial forest for the trees: projects may be done perfectly, but they are completed too late.

The Obsessive-Compulsive mind is exquisitely attuned to detail and these individuals tend to excel in jobs that require exactitude and precision, even seeming to relish the kinds of repetitive checking tasks that would quickly numb the psyches of other workers. Typically bright, they tend to gravitate toward jobs that make the best use of their high-level cognitive skills and devotion to detail — engineering, economics, computer science, etc. At the same time, they are much less likely to have the intuitive flashes of insight or to possess the glib social adroitness of the Histrionic personality. Obsessive-compulsives are not necessarily shy, as are Avoidants; indeed, they can be sociable, even cordial, when the situation calls for it. But overall, they’d rather
get back to the work on their desks than gab around the water cooler. For them, social
interactions are just another tool for getting the job done.

The main psychological dynamic seems to be one of control. Obsessive-Compul-
sives are extremely uncomfortable with imprecision, ambiguity or lack of clarity.
The more intellectual grasp they have on a situation, the better — they are scientists,
not artists; planners, not dreamers. In fact, the modern American work culture
appears to reward those who “give 110 percent” and “go the extra mile,” and in these
settings, an element of the Obsessive-Compulsive style may actually be an asset. Prob-
lems arise when this cognitive style intrudes into work situations where spontaneity
and sociability are required. If not sure what to do, they may be paralyzed with inde-
cisiveness. They will squirm unconfortably at a marketing luncheon to woo a new
client, but they will then go back to the office and produce a meticulously researched,
polished and professional-looking prospectus that clinches the deal. At best, they
derive their satisfaction from a job well-done; at worst, there is no such thing as good
enough and they will make themselves sick — and drive everyone around them crazy
— trying to be better than perfect.

Management Strategies

This is the “detail man” you want working on your pro-
lays. Histrionic or Narcissistic
managers often pick Obsessive-Compulsive assistants because they are able to trans-
late the boss’s grandiose schemes into practical, workable plans. An Obsessive-Com-
pulsive manager and an Obsessive-Compulsive employee may work well together,
each complementing the other’s feverish pace; however, there is a danger of compe-
tition developing between them for the highest degree of perfection. More casual,
laid-back managers will probably find the Obsessive-Compulsive employee annoying
with his constant nit-picking, at the same time grudgingly acknowledging him as an
asset to the overall quality of their mutual projects.

As a manager, you should recognize that the Obsessive-Compulsive employee is
doing his absolute best for you at all times. His errors are likely to be those of com-
mission — too much attention to detail risks delaying and suffocating the whole pro-
ject. An appropriate strategy is to give the Obsessive-Compulsive employee some
direction: let him know in what areas he can ease up and streamline the project, and
on what elements of the task you want him to focus his laser-beam concentration. The
Obsessive-Compulsive employee also responds to honest praise, so don’t forget to
thank him for a job well done.

Antisocial Personality

Clinical Description and Work Style

Antisocial personality is a pattern of consistent disregard for, and violation of, the
rights of others. In its extreme form, it is associated with impulsivity, criminal behav-
ior, sexual promiscuity, substance abuse and an exploitive parasitic, and/or predatory
lifestyle. Such individuals seem to have been born literally without a conscience and
without the ability to empathize; for them, other people are simply sources of gratification. Antisocial personalities may show a keen predatory intelligence and be quite intuitive about the needs and desires of other people, which they then use to manipulate others to their own ends. In more moderate form, they may be seen as merely selfish, immature and untrustworthy people, who are quick to take advantage of favors and friendships, but offer little in return.

Many an employer has been taken in by the glib, superficial charm of the well-groomed interviewee with an impressive (often phony) resume. And yet, many Antisocial workers do possess genuine skills that, at least initially, ingratiate themselves to their employers. Fundamentally, however, Antisocials “live for the game.” The thrill of getting over on the suckers — i.e. all the rest of us — and reinforcing their own sense of cleverness and power becomes an end in itself. For this reason, a number of them manage to rise to positions of organizational power where they are in a position to do great harm.

Usually though, something trips them up, as their continued trail of dishonesty, exploitiveness and betrayal finally can’t be covered up or rationalized away. Often, observers are surprised at the paltriness of the reward for which these individuals may risk their whole careers, not realizing that the Antisocial can’t resist the temptation to score one more clever con, no matter how seemingly inconsequential. Reason, pleas to conscience, punishment, therapy, even appeals to simple self-interest all have no effect. Antisocials feel entitled by their superior cleverness to use other people for their own ends and to take advantage of the sorry suckers who play by the rules.

Another kind of Antisocial personality tries to be just as cunning and conning, but is relatively lower on the intelligence scale and higher on the impulsivity dimension, and so he tends to get into trouble more often, and for more frankly confrontational and even violent behavior. In the worst case, this is the “habitual criminal,” unwilling to live by society’s rules, having a long legal rap sheet since childhood, and forever blaming bad luck or everyone else around him for his troubles. More commonly, shady, if not outright illegal, activity will alternate with legitimate “chump work,” and while temporarily on such a straight job, he may bend every rule and exploit every second chance until he finally gets fired.

Observers are often struck at how fast these individuals can switch from verbally adroit charm to brutal physical confrontation if their wishes are thwarted. In the workplace, such an employee may successfully manipulate and intimidate his managers and coworkers for some time until his con is exposed or challenged, whereupon he may fly into a rage and impulsively resort to violence as “the only way out.”

**Management Strategies**

Your Antisocial employee will do the absolute minimum amount of work he can get away with, apply for every benefit and privilege, antagonize your good employees, drive business away, and finally sue you or try to physically harm you when you attempt to discipline or fire him.
The best measure is prevention. In this regard, the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior, so study his work record. Take your hiring responsibilities seriously, screen carefully and check all references.

If you’re stuck with an Antisocial employee, try to make the most of him by giving clear directions and monitoring his work. For short, simple tasks, such as seasonal postal work or a temporary municipal construction project, his skills may allow him to do an adequate job. But don’t expect long-term follow-through, unless he’s using your agency for his own purposes. Finally, have a well thought-out and carefully documented system of discipline, so if you do have to fire him, you minimize your risk of him making a legal hassle for spite and profit.

**Borderline Personality**

**Clinical Description and Work Style**

Borderline personality is a pattern of unstable interpersonal relationships, fragile self-image and wide emotional swings. Manic highs of boundless optimism may lead to rash, impulsive actions, which are later regretted with depressive lows of self-loathing, sometimes even to the point of attempted suicide. At extremes, Borderlines seem out of touch with reality, whatever they feel or believe at the moment being taken as absolute truth, which may shift abruptly 180 degrees if a different mood or thought strikes them. This can give their behavior and relationships a mercurial Jekyll-and-Hyde quality. Their changeability may also frequently be mistaken for phoniness, but unlike the Antisocial or Paranoid, the Borderline is typically not consciously lying or manipulating. She really believes in — or convinces herself of — whatever version of the truth she’s telling at the moment, and if she changes her story, she expects you to readily go along with the new version, and becomes angry if you don’t.

This changeability also affects personal and business relationships, a phenomenon known as alternating *idealization* and *devaluation*. There are no gray areas in Borderlines’ estimation of other people; they either love you or hate you, and may swing from one to the other with equal white-hot intensity. This is associated with a psychological process called *splitting* in which people are not regarded as multifaceted, complex creatures; they’re either all good or all bad — again, often the same people at different times. The result is maddening unpredictability because you never know from one day to the next how your Borderline employee or workmate will react to you.

Part of the reason for this dizzying alternation between rigidity and fluidity relates to a core identity issue with Borderlines: they just don’t feel like whole, substantial individuals, so they rely on others to mold and support their own self-identities. That’s why they dread being alone. Without external social support, they are unable to modulate their own feelings of emptiness and disintegration, and may resort to substance abuse, hypersexuality, eating disorders or even self-mutilation to provide some kind of bodily anchor to the drifting vessel of their psyche.
Anger is another core feature of the Borderline personality. Frequently capable of superficial cordiality and charm, much of this anger relates to the fear of being abandoned by overly idealized others: “I loved you, I trusted you! How dare you not fulfill my each and every emotional need — I hate you, I’ll kill you!” As workers, they may overidentify with their vocations to the extent that threatened job loss is equated with death of self. Except perhaps for Paranoids, Borderlines are the personalities most likely to hold a grudge. They can be destructively vindictive and relentlessly stalk their targets, or they can bide their time and wait for the right moment to strike back. Outward-directed anger may alternate with inward-directed self-loathing in the form of eating disorders, substance abuse, psychosomatic illnesses or suicidal gestures. On a more moderate level, Borderlines are often “injustice collectors” that always seem to have an endless index of hurts and slights that they can precisely recall and recount at any opportunity. Borderlines will file grievances and lawsuits, not so much for material gain and power trips, as with Antisocials, but for the pursuit of vengeance and righteous “justice.”

**Management Strategies**

The Borderline employee’s tendency to overidealize may initially make her the most devoted of employees. But watch out if you cross her — which usually means doing anything to suggest that you are really not the all-protective, lovingly supportive authority figure she had built you up to be. Remember, threat of abandonment rattles the Borderline’s shaky ego-stability and fills her with panic and rage. Then you’re dirt. This may last until she perceives that you “love” her again, in which case she’ll be back to her cheerful, loyal self — until the next disappointment. So the cycle continues.

Another problem may have little to do with schedules and consistency. Borderlines’ chaotic personal lives — stormy love relationships, ongoing family feuds, suicidal depressions and mood swings, impulsive spending, substance abuse, and other health problems — may result in overutilization of sick days, disturbing calls at work from disgruntled mates and fluctuating work quality due to fatigue, anxiety, depression, or poor health. On the other hand, many Borderlines actually find work to be their one dependable haven of sanity and stability, and they will fight to insulate this environment from the personal crises that otherwise swirl around them. These so-called “high-functioning Borderlines” thus may be almost supernaturally competent and reliable employees, because their jobs are literally what hold them together.

And therein lies one key to dealing with your Borderline employee. As much as possible, try to provide her with a model of stability and reliability. Reward accomplishment appropriately, but set limits firmly, if gently. Give constructive criticism in as positive a context as possible (“You’re giving a great effort on the XYZ project. Here are some ways to make even better use of your skills”). To borrow a concept from psychoanalytic theory, by providing the right kind of “holding environment,” your Borderline employee will probably try to do her best job for you. Just be prepared to weather the inevitable storms along the way.
Histrionic Personality

Clinical Description and Work Style

Histrionic personality is a pattern of excessive emotionality, attention-seeking, need for excitement, flamboyant theatricality in speech and behavior, a nonlogical and impressionistic cognitive style, and use of exaggeration to maintain largely superficial relationships for the purpose of getting emotional needs met by being cared for by others. When such needs are not met, the Histrionic personality may become bitterly angry or floridly depressed, or develop dramatic psychosomatic ailments and symptoms.

When she is in her “up” mood, the Histrionic employee will be delightful and entertaining to work with. In fact, Histrionic personalities naturally gravitate to careers that put them in front of adoring crowds: acting, politics, teaching, sales, and so on. This is the quintessential “people person.” Unlike the often overly intense, needy and edgy persona of the Borderline, Histrionics more consistently present themselves as interpersonally engaged and genuinely likeable. With their quick wit and engaging “touchy-feely” interpersonal style, they tend to form great first impressions, because for them this is not an act. They absolutely love getting attention from people and genuinely enjoy such positive interactions.

The problem comes in the follow-through. The Histrionic personality is characterized by what has been termed the impressionistic cognitive style. Decisions tend to be formed on the basis of impressions and intuitions, with rational analysis of facts and details regarded as an intrusive annoyance: “If it feels right, it must be true — don’t confuse me with pesky details.” In some contexts, this gut-instinct type of decision-making may lead to flashes of insight and spontaneous creativity, but without careful follow-up planning, the project may disintegrate into a million directionless fragments. Worse, without grounding in logic and reason, impressionistically formed opinions and decisions tend to change abruptly: what feels right and is therefore absolutely true today is completely different than what felt right and was equally true yesterday.

For these reasons, Histrionic personality traits are likely to prevent an individual from moving up very far within an organization, especially where attention to technical details or complex personnel management are important. The pattern of attention-seeking behavior and superficial charm in the absence of substantive accomplishment soon wears thin. If the Histrionic employee perceives that her accomplishments have been undervalued — that her workmates and superiors don’t like her — she may react with anger, depression or physical symptoms, all expressed with a characteristic flamboyant and theatrical style.

Management Strategies

Good humor is infectious, and your Histrionic employee may provide a refreshing dose of levity in an otherwise somber office environment. However, sometimes real work requires people to cut the comedy and get down to business, and if a critical situation demands a more serious effort and workplace tone, the perennially sweet
Pollyanna demeanor of the Histrionic employee may soon take on a queasy, saccharinny quality. However, if you let the Histrionic play to her strengths — as a salesperson, marketer, public relations rep, or front-office staff person — she may quickly become a credit to your organization because her friendly, helpful style will genuinely make people feel good about themselves and your organization.

In the real world of business, just about any job has aspects that involve dealing with dull, ordinary gruntwork. Unfortunately, this is not the personality who takes well to crunching numbers or working on details; she will quickly get bored and her efficiency will lag. If your Histrionic employee is chronically late or messy with her work, supervision will be necessary. Managers need to take a highly supportive approach in describing and reinforcing positive, work-relevant behavior, but be able to back off a few emotional steps when excessive praise and attention are sought for their own sake. Gentle, reality-based guidance (“I really appreciate your effort and enthusiasm, but you need to work a little harder on your own with this project to make sure it’s completed by the deadline”) may protect the employee’s self-esteem while refocusing her efforts on work-related tasks. Try to provide as much detail as necessary, so that the Histrionic employee understands clearly how to carry out the task, but not so much explicit direction that she becomes dependent on your spoon-feeding her every step of the project. Overall, if you provide the proper level of instruction and guidance, and generously lavish praise when it is genuinely due, you will have an unusually loyal and pleasant employee.

**Narcissistic Personality**

**Clinical Description and Work Style**

Narcissistic personality is a pattern of grandiosity, entitlement, need for admiration, lack of empathy for others’ feelings or opinions and expecting unearned high praise regardless of their actual effort or accomplishment. In other words, these are the classic “egotists” or “narcissists.”

If someone believes that they are already highly talented and accomplished, they are not likely to expend much effort toward self-improvement, on the job or otherwise, because how can you improve on perfection? In mild cases, the Narcissist may perceive that others don’t share his inflated self-view, but may “forgive” them for their puny short-sightedness. In more severe cases, the Narcissist may have difficulty differentiating self from other and wish from reality, and so may idiosyncratically construe events on the basis of his own wishes and desired outcomes rather than actual reality or sensitivity to the feelings and reactions of others. In such cases, this personality style may blend over into a Paranoid one.

Under the surface of many a Narcissist’s superficially bloated ego may lie a core of fragile self-esteem and intense feelings of shame and inadequacy. In such cases, the friendly, expansive Narcissist who’s getting the adulation he thinks he deserves, may suddenly transmogrify into a sullen, nasty and vengeful enemy when his thin emotional skin is nicked by a criticism or jibe. In other cases, the Narcissistic hide is so
thick and tough that even the worst insult hurled at him hardly makes a scratch — he knows that others merely resent him for his greatness and takes their petulant whining in self-assured stride.

Narcissists can be difficult employees precisely because they feel perpetually underappreciated. Often, at the beginning of their employment, they appear flushed with enthusiasm over being able to impress everyone at their new job with their skill and brilliance. But as they realize that their managers and coworkers want them to do things in a particular way and expect a certain level of real output, the mood of the Narcissistic worker may sour and motivation may flag. Managers may notice that as time goes by, this bright, new, creative team member seems to be more talk than action. Coaching, counseling and mentoring are all difficult with the Narcissistic employee, because his self-inflated view and sense of entitlement cause him to dismiss out of hand any advice or direction he feels is coming from people who are, after all, beneath him.

**Management Strategies**

If the Narcissistic employee is doing an acceptable job, and there is genuinely room for improvement, a collaborative, “we’re in this together” type of coaching style from someone the employee respects may be effective. The Narcissistic employee may welcome the attention from the higher-ups, especially if the coaching session includes soliciting the employee’s input and advice: “You’ve usually got some good ideas about these things — how do you think we can use your work to make our department more productive?” Remember, the Narcissist may actually have some useful ideas, even if he’s not so keen about carrying them to completion. Of course, if the Narcissistic employee spouts forth unrealistic, nonsensical and purely self-aggrandizing schemes, at least you’ll be able to decide if you want to waste any more time with him. The problem is rarely lack of brilliant suggestions; it’s the inevitable lapses on the follow-through (“Why should I have to do all the grunt work?”) that causes the project to crash prematurely or rot on the vine.

A more malignant kind of Narcissistic employee is the one who’s sense of entitlement includes the right to manipulate and exploit others for his own purposes; this type often has features of the Antisocial and Paranoid personality styles as well. Often these types can be found at middle-management levels, where they have carved out their own little fiefdoms, terrorizing their subordinates and sweet-talking their superiors (but resenting it!) to keep the lid on. After a corporate shake-up, subsequent investigations may lead to discovery of all kinds of unfair, corrupt and illegal practices having occurred for years on the watch of these employees. Even if not frankly dishonest, Narcissists often develop intense personal investments in their job roles, and this is one type of personality that may be likely to resort to aggressive litigation or even workplace violence when terminated. Thus, disciplining and, if necessary, firing these workers must be done carefully and tactfully, and be well-documented.
Paranoid Personality

Clinical Description and Work Style

Paranoid personality is a pattern of pervasive distrust and suspiciousness, so that others’ actions and motives are invariably interpreted as deceptive, persecutory or malevolent. Their radar is supersensitive in picking up verbal and nonverbal cues of duplicity, hostility and betrayal. Actually, their perceptions may be quite accurate; it’s their interpretations that are skewed, typically revolving around the theme that people are mean, selfish creatures who will screw you the first chance they get.

Which, in fact, pretty much describes the Paranoid himself, since projection — the attributing to others the internal motives most distasteful to oneself — is the primary defense mechanism of most Paranoids. They “can’t help” being suspicious and always having to keep their guard up; what else can they do, surrounded by a sea of enemies? In addition to projection, Paranoids tend to externalize blame generally; nothing is ever their fault. And why should it be, since underlying the Paranoid cognitive style is often a sense of Narcissistic grandiosity: they’re so talented and special that people naturally hate them and want to take them down a peg. Again, this is typically their own projected view of others in positions of authority, whose power and status they bitterly envy and covet.

In this sense, there are similarities between the Paranoid and Narcissistic personalities. But whereas the Narcissist might self-servingly accept certain sycophants into his inner circle of trusted admirers, the Paranoid trusts no one. When your ability or willingness to serve has reached its end, Narcissists will merely discard you. Paranoids will hunt you down and persecute you for your betrayal.

Because they often have a bent for technical details and are able to channel considerable energy in the direction of goal accomplishment, Paranoids may actually achieve considerable success at work. In highly competitive industries that call for combativeness against well-defined corporate “enemies,” Paranoid personality styles may be quite functional, and they may even emerge as leaders. However, a war-room mentality that is not kept in check, or outward-directed suspicion that is blown back toward co-workers and subordinates, can result in considerable negative fallout. Thus emerges a vicious cycle of mistrust and hostility as coworkers come to shun their persistently obnoxious Paranoid associate, only confirming his suspicions of plots and intrigue, leading to more outright avoidance and hostility and perhaps even self-defensive moves on the part of others. Eventually, as the saying goes, “just because you’re paranoid, it doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you.”

Management Strategies

If you supervise a Paranoid employee, watch your back. This is not to suggest that you become paranoid yourself, but like the Antisocial employee, the Paranoid will have no compunction about harming you to get what he feels he deserves. The motivational difference is that the Antisocial takes advantage of people for the sheer predatory thrill of ripping off unearned goodies, whereas the Paranoid actually feels morally justified in using any means necessary to protect what he feels he deserves from the unfair
forces arrayed against him. The practical difference is that the Antisocial’s impulsivity will often impel him to make rash power grabs that may backfire and spell his doom, while the more cunning Paranoid can afford to wait and carefully spin his web.

In managing the Paranoid personality, take care to keep workplace assignments rational and straightforward. Expect suspicious questioning of your own and others’ motives and of the reasons for assignments, and be prepared for “helpful information” about the incompetence and/or malfeasance of fellow coworkers. As much as possible, offer calm, rational explanations for work tasks, and provide forthright but nonconfrontational reality checks for Paranoid misperceptions or misinterpretations, especially under conditions of stress, when conspiratorial cognition is more prone to spin out of control.

In general, Paranoids respond better to tight logic than loose assurances, and also tend to accede to legitimate authority, so don’t be afraid to stand your ground as the boss and make it clear that you expect policies to be followed. Overall, if you can convince your Paranoid employee that there is a direct connection between him doing his job properly and his chances of realistic advancement up the organizational food chain, he may become one of your most assiduous workers — although always and forever looking for the next angle.

**Schizoid & Schizotypal Personalities**

**Clinical Description and Work Style**

The central characteristics of both Schizoid and Schizotypal personalities include avoidance of others, severe deficiencies in social skills, generalized withdrawal from life and sometimes deficits in perceptual and cognitive skills. Schizoid personality is a pattern of aloof detachment from social interaction, with a restricted range of emotional expression. These are people who don’t need people, and are perfectly happy being left to themselves. Schizotypal personality additionally includes more serious disturbances of thinking, more bizarre behavior and possibly delusions. Clinical consensus holds that these two personality disorders represent points on a continuum from Schizoid to Schizotypal to outright Schizophrenia, the latter characterized by severe distortions of thought, perception and action, including delusions and hallucinations.

Due to their impulsivity, poor socialization, impaired contact with reality, bizarre behavior and general inconsistency, individuals with more severe expressions of this spectrum — Schizotypal personality disorder or frank Schizophrenia — are not likely to last very long in traditional employment settings, and any work they do is likely to be in the context of a supported or accommodated work environment.

However, some Schizoids may function adequately in certain employment settings. They will be the “oddballs” who keep to themselves, never really causing any trouble, but never forming any kind of substantial relationships with their workmates. Coworkers will notice a distinct lack of interpersonal relatedness, an absence of “presence” in social interactions: “It’s like I’m talking to him and he answers, but he’s not really in the room.” Missing are the normal little social pleasantries and banter that characterize human contact between people who spend many hours a day together.
The Schizoid doesn’t share jokes, declines office gossip, prefers to eat lunch alone and keeps workplace conversation on work-related topics.

Some similarities may be noted between the Schizoid personality and the Avoidant personality, in that both tend to shun social interaction, but for different reasons. Avoidants fear people; more specifically, they fear rejection by other people, so they protect their emotional flanks by not exposing themselves to possible criticism. Schizoids just don’t need people at all. They could care less what others think of them, so they make no effort to impress or ingratiate themselves with others. For them, people are just objects in the environment, like office furniture, tools, telephones or computers.

**Management Strategies**

Schizoid personalities may be well-suited to isolated, low-level jobs of limited complexity. On the shop floor or in the corporate office, they will certainly keep to themselves, but may be among the most reliable of workers, having few interpersonal entanglements to interfere with their schedules. They will come in on time, follow orders, accommodate shift changes, all without complaint, unless their job interferes with something more important, like a religious group meeting or idiosyncratic personal routine. Then they may abruptly quit, because the job no longer “fits” them. A fair number of Schizoids are actually quite intelligent and may possess superlative technical skills. Some of them are the classic “computer geeks,” content to live 24/7 by screen and keyboard; preferring the company of virtual images and ideas to real flesh-and-blood people.

Ironically, the less you see this employee, the better, since he will typically work best under conditions of both interpersonal distance and quiet, nonthreatening support. Positions in which monitoring can be impersonal (e.g. the new trend toward computerized “e-management”), and in which there is some structure and pacing inherent in the work itself, may be especially suitable for this employee.

Again, don’t expect your Schizoid employee to laugh at your jokes, commiserate with your personal troubles or respond to standard carrot-and-stick approaches to motivation and discipline. Let him know what you want done, how you want him to do it, when it’s expected to be completed, and then leave him alone. However, to compensate for the Schizoid tendency to “get off track,” periodic supportive supervision sessions may be necessary to monitor and productively focus his progress.

**Conclusion: Learning to Manage Human Complexity**

No one paper, lecture or book can turn a person into an industrial/organizational psychologist. But you don’t have to be a mental health or management science expert to appreciate how transforming interpersonal minuses into plusses can make otherwise unpleasant work relationships bearable, even enjoyable. As a manager, look for the aspects of your employee’s personality that complement your own. Try to match the job with the person or vice versa. And if all else fails, endeavor to achieve an amicable separation, hoping that the inappropriate employee will find a better fitting niche somewhere else in the world of work.
Notes


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