

Ethikos Volume 35, Number 4. October 01, 2021

Shape a desirable workplace—even with undesirable employees

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A recent magazine article headlined “Jaw-dropping study: Executives who manipulate earnings are hired for their lack of ethics”^[1] steered readers to psychology research. In a laboratory experiment, when a company felt pressure to “manage earnings” (i.e., unethically inflate earnings reports), recruiters tended to recommend—and experienced executives tended to hire—candidates with undesirable personality traits. The authors noted this is usually seen as an accidental byproduct of hiring strong leaders, but they concluded some organizations purposely hire managers willing to “push ethical boundaries.”^[2]

The research focused on *traits*, usually defined as genetic characteristics impossible for an individual to change at will. But the observable effects attributed to those traits are *behaviors* like ethics and leadership that individuals often change at will. Understanding this distinction between traits and behaviors is critical to successful corporate business ethics programs.

Similar to the hiring process, companies that promote managers who get results sometimes appear to ignore repeated complaints about the behaviors those managers exhibited to get those results. It may be that senior managers in the loop for promotions do not routinely monitor behavior complaints, and people who handle behavior complaints are not in the promotion coordination loop to begin with.

So what is the reason behind the hiring and promoting of individuals who have exhibited undesirable traits and behaviors? One explanation is that there is a purposeful intent to use these unethical people to benefit the organization. But nothing in the research indicates recruiters or corporate executives who operate in real-world hiring or promotion situations are even aware of the undesirable traits, much less trying to detect or measure them. A second explanation would be that there is an inadvertent outcome of selecting candidates for the *positive* aspects of behaviors such as confidence, creativity, and an aggressive pursuit of business opportunities. The steps in the hiring or promotion process likely do not make visible any *negative* aspects of these same behaviors; thus, hiring or promoting people with undesirable personalities may be an unintentional result of the process. A third explanation might be the influence of the organizational culture. That is, a candidate may show desirable behaviors and fit well in the organization’s existing corporate culture, but depending on the health of this environment, undesirable traits may remain hidden.

Even small companies usually have employees who have some undesirable personality traits—perhaps hidden from plain view—that could potentially surface in the form of an ethics violation. This article explores that reality and what a company can do to help such employees avoid ethics violations and foster their productivity and success.

How undesirable personality traits can be desirable to employers

Everyone has personality traits that include different degrees of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy

—traits that psychologists labeled undesirable because they tend to make people callous, selfish, and malevolent. A 20-year stream of psychology literature often labels those traits the “dark triad.” Three reasons this paper avoids that label are that (1) everyone can be rated on these traits on a scale ranging from low to high, (2) “dark” can be an offensive word because it has links to racism, and (3) research finds the three traits are not a single entity; rather, they are somewhat related but very independent. All three traits can lead to socially aversive behavior, so people with high amounts tend to hide them from others and even themselves, demonstrating a sort of self-deception.

If trait strength conforms to the statistical normal distribution—the bell curve—then a workplace with 2,000 employees might expect about 50 high scorers, but the percentage might vary by jobs and industry. People who exhibit strong undesirable traits may gravitate to certain jobs like supervisor and manager, and industries like politics, law enforcement, and stock brokerage.

Below we cover both the desirable business behaviors and the negative workplace behaviors that stem from the undesirable trait.

Machiavellianism

When “Mach” (researchers’ one-syllable shorthand for the eight-syllable tongue twister Machiavellianism) is high, people display behaviors of a strong leader: they think strategically and are not impulsive. They plan ahead, build social networks and alliances, and are careful to establish and maintain a good reputation. They display skill in handling people; interest in organizational politics; ability to base decisions on objective standards rather than loyalty or emotions; and strong desire for status, control, success, and achievement. They gain trust and respect, achieve goals and noteworthy successes, and rise to leadership positions.

High-Mach people also tend to display aversive behaviors. They think it is okay to manipulate others to attain goals. They are cynical. They believe other people are gullible and foolish. They put expediency above principle—they will do anything to win. They are likely to cheat, lie, and with calculated strategic purpose betray others and seek revenge.

Narcissism

When this trait is high, people may emerge as leaders. They appear charismatic, inspirational, creative, and able to cope with organizational change.

Highly narcissistic people also tend to display a grandiose sense of self-importance, superiority, and dominance. They think everything should be about them. They boast and appear to believe their boasts even if evidence shows the boasts are untrue. They have a sense of entitlement, promote their own interests, exaggerate their achievements, and expect special treatment. They tend to mistreat subordinates, create unhappy workplaces, and ignore negative feedback. They are likely to disregard company ethical standards, become hostile and aggressive when they feel threats to their egos; they may even engage in embezzlement, incivility, bullying, and white-collar crime.

Consider the climate and culture gap

Tracy’s manager asks her to do something discreetly so no one else will be aware of it and the department can meet expected quarterly numbers. That manager’s bonus is on the line. What should Tracy do?

Psychopathy

When this trait is of a high level, people may show leadership behaviors. They seek positions of influence, display good communication skills, are good workers, and often show decisiveness and a willingness to take risks. They may be able to control their impulsivity and antisocial actions.

On the flip side, these individuals use a mask of normalcy to hide damaging behaviors. They can be impulsive, elevate the importance of their own wishes and well-being, minimize the rights and the well-being of others, and show little concern for social regulatory mechanisms. They are routinely untruthful and willing to use dishonesty to their personal advantage. Their charm is superficial. They lack empathy and guilt and are manipulative, egocentric, dishonest, callous, thrill seeking, and prone to criminal behavior.

Consider the climate and culture gap

Sandy works at one of your company's retail stores. When Sandy's boss does not like a customer, she encourages Sandy to be rude and not help them. The boss also racially profiles customers, assuming some will steal merchandise, and then orders Sandy to supervise them closely. What should Sandy do?

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