Coming to Terms with your Dark Side

By Michael Jarrett

Excessive egotism and low self-awareness are the psychological profiles associated with the 'dark side'. In fact, they also tend to be linked with scandalous incidents that mar the reputations of high-profile leaders. This article identifies the characteristics of the dark side, helps understand their roots and gives direction on how to channel them.

"Man is not truly one, but two."

\- Robert Louis Stevenson

What do the following stories have in common: *the Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *The Three faces of Eve* and the block buster movie *Star Wars*? They characterize a popular theme that psychologists have known for a very long time. People are complex creatures, driven by conflicting motives often expressed as multiple selves. On the one hand there is a presenting, idealized self, the one every one sees and is well behaved; and on the other hand, there is the side that expresses depression, doubts, anger, selfishness and narcissism. This is often referred to as 'the dark side'.

A vivid example of these internal, conflicting selves is characterized by the life of Dominique Strauss Kahn. DSK was a brilliant economist and lawyer, a thought leader for the French Socialist Party and Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund when this outstanding track record was suddenly marred by his alleged involvement in sex scandals, various affairs and a 'moral fault' that beset him in a hotel room in down town New York. How can this be the same person? While an extreme example, evidence suggests that this could be any one of us, and when executive leaders are presented with these ideas, they balk at the notion that it applies to them. Yet studies show quite the reverse. It's normal.

The purpose of this article is to address three questions: What is the dark side? What are the implications for executive leaders? What can they do about it?

What is it?

The 'dark side' is the part of the self that lies hidden in the shadows of our personality. We are often surprised to learn that it exists and it is usually a part of ourselves that we would rather deny - a sort of motived forgetting. The problem is that it pops up when we least expect it and has unintended effects in the way we think, feel and act, often unconsciously. The result can lead to misery and loss to those involved.

During the financial crisis both executives and workers found the stresses excessive and throughout the press, reports of suicide were not uncommon. Freddie Mac, Samsung and France Telecom all experienced these tragic losses. A report in the financial press noted that experts in the UK occupational

health profession detected an increase in stress, including suicide attempts, particularly in the finance sector. Executives continue even though they feel inadequate. They operate with an 'imposter syndrome', where they live in fear of being found out as empty.[1] This 'false self' is what people present to the outside world. But the other side rumbles quietly inside, acting out in less extreme ways but still potentially dysfunctional. It may manifest itself as an inability to face work, a constant feeling of anxiety or a loss of reality when making decisions.

In Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* there are two distinctive and emerging personalities. Dr. Henry Jekyll is the urbane, successful, middle-aged man who represents the acceptable, social norms of Victorian society of the time. You might image yourself as a modern day version of such a professional. However, there is another side to him, which has uncontrollable, antisocial urges. Unfortunately, his attempts to control these drives by taking a secret potion goes wrong and instead he transforms into the evil Edward Hyde, who is physically deformed, ugly and brutal. This character commits violent deeds, is without remorse and is power hungry. He is everything that Jekyll is not. Despite countless attempts, Hyde becomes increasingly powerful – the potion is no longer required for him to be unleashed as the dark side.

Stevenson's novel is an elegant metaphor of the challenges of our two selves, which is also fitting for contemporary leaders. There are two sides of our lives: the socially acceptable self and the 'dark side' that we shamefully hide. Jekyll/Hyde's potion represents drugs, drink or other compensatory addictions where executives sometimes get their fix, satisfaction or release as an antidote to the demands that life brings. Unfortunately, as we see in the novel, 'potions' can become addictive. In my experience of coaching senior executives, these challenges are as alive today as they were when the book was written over a hundred years ago. An executive commenting

from Australia says: "we have seen examples of these dark sides reflected in legal action against managers for discrimination, sexual abuse, etc. If only the organisations they work in had real policies to address these issues". My point is that it continues to lurk in the corners of our corporate corridors.

Studies show that we tend to deny this 'negative' part of ourselves as a form of self-protection. We split off these bad feelings and project them onto others.[2] Thus, we see these traits in others but definitely not in ourselves. Here lies the first problem. Clinical and ego psychologists have various theories to explain the development of these internal conflicts and the defense mechanisms that we deploy to navigate everyday life. However, they tend to agree that these elements operate unconsciously and their roots are often found in childhood experiences, which have "an onset in adolescence or early adulthood". According to some authorities, they tend to be "pervasive and inflexible" and are "stable over time".[3] They represent personality fault-lines that are dispositional - inherently based on personality preferences - rather than the stress of a specific situation although, obviously, difficult situations will amplify a condition that is already latently present.

Self-Defeating Styles

Psychologists Robert Hogan and Joyce Hogan[4] identify three dominant dysfunctional styles based on people's personality: dramatic, adventurous and compliant. They argue that these provide predictors of leadership effectiveness in organizations and potential risks that explain managerial incompetence. Moreover, they suggest that these fault lines are not immediately apparent. Remember, like Dr. Jekyll, executives can fake it as reflected by the presentation of their false self. It is only over time, when they drop their guard, that the dark side may really surface.

So what are signs? The *Dramatic* style is characterized by moodiness, mistrust of others, an excessive sensitivity to criticism and typically someone who is aloof and might be described as arrogant. They are hard to please and quick to anger. They tend to be psychologically detached from others and thus find it hard to form good quality relationships.

Adventurous styles tend to be associated with leaders who are bold and imaginative. They are reputed for taking excessive risks despite counsel and can be seen as creative eccentrics. Escalation of commitment and bold strategies can test the boundaries. In extreme cases, such types suffer from the problems of cognitive impairment as they fail to learn from experience. Relationships with others can be stormy, where people never know where they stand. Marcel Ospel's drive to make UBS the world's investment bank, reflects some of these behaviors. His ambitions led to excesses that undermined a Swiss hallmark and sparked a public outcry.

Finally, those with a *compliant* style tend to hide from the limelight and seek conformity. They can be excessively detailed and seek rules and order over change. In extreme cases they can be obsessional and compulsive. The psychological drivers for these behaviours are associated with high levels of anxiety and the need for reassurance and approval, especially from superiors.

Each is associated with an underlying personality structure that is based on poor interpersonal relationships. These types are not always in such pure form but they do provide initial indicators. What is agreed upon is that such executives compulsively repeat failed, social interactions and so do not learn from their mistakes.

Theories of Attachment

So why are some executives able to manage these internal tensions and other are not? One perspective that tries to understand the underlying structure of these behaviours is attachment theory. Decades of research by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth,[5] identified that adults develop characteristic patterns of relationship attachment during childhood. They build internal working models and these become the mental frameworks for identity formation, relationships with others and managing boundaries, especially with authority. Approximately sixty percent of people form healthy, secure attachments as adults. A series of studies by Micha Popper and his colleagues suggest there is a positive, strong and statistically significant relationship between those that are securely attached and a transformational leadership style.[6] Such leaders tend to communicate a clear vision, inspire trust, encourage autonomy and gain respect from their subordinates. Research has generally found that transformational leaders motivate followers to gain higher levels of performance, exert more discretionary effort and show more commitment than to other types of leaders.

However, those that form insecure attachments can be anxious, avoidant or withdrawn, leading to unresolved internal conflicts, poor relationships and an inability to regulate themselves or accept the authority of others.

What Can Be Done?

The first problem is to accept that there might be an issue and face the internal wrath. In the story of *The Three Faces of Eve*, there are three main personalities: Eve White who is the self-effacing mother and wife. Her life is humdrum, boring and ritualistic. She observes the rules of everyday life and is relatively compliant. In contrast, the other character is Eve Black. She is fun loving, passionate and has little regard for social norms. She is so different that she even attempts to kill her own child and represents an alter ego, the unacknowledged dark side. The story is a journey of bringing together these two parts of Eve into an integrated whole, who is represented by the third character Jane. She is stable, reflective and as a result both Eves disappear, as their functions are no longer required. This account is based on real life events but it is a journey that most shun.

Executive leaders are no different. Clinical experience suggests that this is a taboo subject. Even so, executives too have to engage in a process that acknowledges and accepts their whole self: the socially acceptable part and the shadow side. It is the denial and projecting their feelings onto others that reinforces the problem. It's like taking the potion and wondering why Hyde,

the dark side, becomes stronger and increasingly powerful.

To help in this journey executive leaders need an aid. The transformational journey that takes place in the Star War episodes is facilitated by the wisdom of Yoda, who provides sagacious counsel against the dangers of the dark side. Today's executive is more likely to choose a coach to get him through the dark side, and thus, it is helpful to have a coach who is psychologically informed. Take the case of Barry Little.[7] When he first joined his executive board he felt 'inconsequential' and a 'fraud'. However, these feelings did not show up there but spilled over into his management team, where he was the formal leader. There he was apt to have emotional outbursts with his staff and sometimes would humiliate them by his razor-sharp intellectual wit, which he used to vent his frustrations. These exchanges contrasted sharply with his always-polite relationship with the consultant, where Barry took the discussions seriously and he was a 'good boy'. The coach drew attention to the splitting of the two Barrys – the angry one and the nice one. It increased his awareness and allowed him to actively adjust his behaviour, be more consistent and personally integrated as a leader.

There is a small group of people who are able to channel and sublimate their dark side with very positive outcomes. Steve Jobs has become an iconic symbol of 20th century corporate success. But not everyone enjoyed working with him. Walter Isaacson, his official biographer, tells us Jobs had a 'reality distortion' field that allowed him to see things in his own special way. He could be obnoxious and controlling, to the point of anguishing over the size of the pixels of the early Mac or paint colours. He was also stubborn even to the point of the last days of his life. Some won the odd battle; others quit but most just went with it.[8] Jobs' experience of adoption and growing up helps to explain his relationship style as noted by Isaacson. He had the characteristics of the dark side yet these were channelled into something many admired. He was an exception. For most executives, it's a journey of concerted change to activate their ability to regulate the dark side.

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The organisational context also plays a moderating role as noted by the Australian executive earlier. Those that make leaders accountable and apply sanctions for misdemeanors will capture the excesses of the dark side early. In the cases of both Enron and Worldcom, the 'cowboy culture' allowed the cancerous growth of dysfunctional leadership to corrupt and bankrupt both companies. Lord Acton's old adage that 'power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely' seems to hold some truth. A review of the evidence suggests that power holders tend to err on the dark side: they exhibit narcissism, contempt for their direct reports, are associated with CEO hubris and their dark side can even explain behaviours of harrassment.[9] Thus, making them more accountable can channel their actions.

There is also the law of natural decay. One of two things can happen. The dark side becomes so consuming that executives derail. They do something to harm their reputation á la DSK. Secondly, stakeholders say 'enough is enough' and their legitimacy is questioned: take the "Shareholder Spring" in response to CEO pay. Either way, these are among the countervailing forces that attenuate abuses that can go with the dark side.

Use The Force

We all have a dark side: some more than others. All of the stories are also about the resolution of the internal struggles of outward sociability and the untrammeled urges of the shadow. They have important lessons for executive leaders. These issues can be resolved but first need to be acknowledged, or else they can continue to unconsciously operate in ways that are detrimental to leaders' self-efficacy, their teams and their organisations. The roots of these come from childhood but what makes the difference is to the ability to mobilize internal regulation with the aid of a skillful helper.

On balance, it is probably better to deal with these inner dynamics than have external world exposure to your fault lines. Yoda concludes: "Fear is the path to the dark side". Thus don't be afraid: use the force of the dark side and channel it for the greater good.

About the author

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