Coaching the Toxic Leader

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Senior executives have the power to create an environment that allows people to grow and give their best—or a toxic workplace where everyone is unhappy. How executives end up using that power depends in part on their mental health. Sound, stable bosses generally build companies where the rules make sense to employees, freeing them to focus on performing their jobs well. But if the boss’s psychological makeup is warped, business plans, ideas, interactions, and even the systems and structure of the organization itself will reflect his or her pathologies.

As an executive coach, I’ve sometimes come across leaders with mental demons. I’ve put a number of these bosses on the couch, in an effort to understand and counsel them. In the following pages I’ll describe some of the more common pathologies I’ve encountered and explain how I’ve helped people deal with them.

Notably, these pathologies don’t include isolated instances of depression. Depression is part of the human condition; we all suffer from it. When it’s moderately present, it doesn’t require special coaching intervention. And when it’s acute and chronic, it tends to be part of the syndromes I’ll present here.

Not everyone falls neatly into one or another of the categories I describe; we’re often a bit of this and a bit of that. And most bosses are not mentally ill, but a surprising number of senior executives do have a personality disorder of some kind. Even with executives who are relatively healthy emotionally, you nearly always run across some of the characteristics described here, which need to be addressed in similar fashion (though not necessarily accompanied by medication and formal therapy).

While these disorders can be managed, some toxic leaders will prove impossible to change. (See the sidebar “The Incurable Executive.”) Change can often be an uphill battle, in no small part because many companies support (and are even breeding grounds for) dysfunctional behavior. Fortunately, most executives recognize when they have problems and have the strength of character to want to fix them, as the stories that follow will illustrate.
defending us against the vicissitudes of life. It enables us to feel good about ourselves and to impose ourselves a little. But too much narcissism is dangerous. Driven by grandiose fantasies about themselves, pathological narcissists are selfish and inconsiderate, demand excessive attention, feel entitled, and pursue power and prestige at all costs.

**How to Recognize the Condition**

A good way to spot a narcissist is to look at how his subordinates respond to him. Let me tell you about Simon. When I first met him, he was regarded as one of the most promising senior executives in his company, although a number of directors had doubts about whether he was the right person to succeed the CEO. Would Simon be able to take the company to its next level? Did he have enough maturity? Given their doubts, I was asked by Agnes, the VP of talent management, to become Simon’s executive coach with the aim of preparing him for possible succession.

Questions about Simon had begun to arise. Agnes explained, after he made a series of rash decisions, which raised a red flag about whether he understood what the corporation’s culture was all about. Meanwhile his lobbying efforts to be elected “businessman of the year” had inspired resentment in the company. If that weren’t enough, he had relocated the regional head office to a new, more upmarket location. It may have been the right decision (given the cramped conditions of the old office), but it had turned out to be a lot more expensive than planned.

Capping that, Simon was leasing a small corporate plane—his somewhat lame excuse being that it would save money, given the difficulties of connecting the head office to the other offices in the region.

Another criticism related to his deal making. Agnes told me that Simon had embarked on a dramatic expansion plan and discussed possible acquisitions with investment bankers, despite cautioning from the people who worked for him.

More generally, people in the organization viewed Simon as a “user”—he never reciprocated. One person said that he felt like part of the furniture on Simon’s stage to success. Agnes told me that when she met with some of Simon’s subordinates over drinks, they went on and on about their dislike of what was happening at the office. Some of the better people had already joined the competition; some had transferred to different units. It made her (and others) wonder whether Simon really was the golden boy.

Like many narcissists, Simon was anything but a wallflower. He was tall, well dressed, and friendly, with a somewhat seductive manner. He seemed easy to talk to; he didn’t hold back and opened up quickly about his relatively short tenure at the company—telling me he’d been “poached” from a competitor and adding that the press had made a fuss about how costly a hire he’d been. He told me that he’d really liked his previous job, but given how things stood, the top job would not have been open for some time. That was the main reason that he’d accepted his present position. When I asked about his future, Simon made it apparent that he believed he was a shoo-in as the CEO’s replacement. He obviously didn’t think much of the other candidates.

Most revealing was the extent to which Simon lived in a binary world where people were either “for” or “against” him. He made quite clear that any critics were easily cast as villains.

**Coaching a Narcissist**

Tempting though it may be to administer a loud wake-up call, the first rule when dealing with nar-
likely possible actions are to help or hinder the realization of the executive’s goal. This improves the actual behavior and strengthens the coach’s credibility.

Building self-confidence takes time, as it did in Simon’s case. But gradually I could see him become less needy and more prepared to share the limelight. He slowly began to empathize with colleagues and become an effective mentor. All in all, his behavior was more grounded in reality and better attuned to the values of the company. The key decision makers there noted the changes and liked what they saw. When the time came for the CEO to retire, Simon was selected for the top job.

Unfortunately, narcissists all too commonly regress into their old ways, especially once they’ve achieved their ambition. For this reason, it’s important to follow up with more engagement. To ensure the continuity of Simon’s new self after his appointment as CEO, I suggested that he attend a CEO seminar I was running. I felt that these group sessions with leaders from other companies would help stabilize his new, more balanced self-image.

**THE MANIC-DEPRESSIVE**

Manic depression, or bipolar disorder, is another psychological condition that some executives suffer from. Like most mental disorders, it varies in intensity, but even relatively mild forms can derail careers and alienate friends and colleagues.
How to Recognize the Condition
Let me share another experience I had, this one with a founder and CEO called Frank. People told me that dealing with Frank, a person for whom there seemed to be no emotional middle ground, often made them feel like firefighters; they were constantly running behind him putting out emotional blazes. But, despite his volatility, colleagues also noted how attractive and contagious Frank’s energy and ebullience could be. What’s more, he had a knack for drawing people to him—something that had contributed to the original success of the firm.

Yet Frank was now a major risk. The firm’s situation was precarious: A big expansion attempt had failed, creating a serious liquidity problem, while a worrisome number of capable executives were leaving or looking for an exit. If Frank couldn’t be reined in, the dissolution of the firm was a real possibility.

When I talked to Frank, it became clear that he had a bipolar disorder. Some years before (on the advice of his wife), he’d consulted a psychiatrist, who had prescribed him lithium. Frank acknowledged that it had helped him for a while but added that the experience had been mixed. Life with the drug was not as rich as life without it: It was more exciting and dampened his emotions. What he did—looking at the garden, listening to the birds, talking with an associate, making a deal—was experienced much less deeply. He missed the “highs,” and he decided to stop taking the medication.

Frank was also no stranger to substance abuse. He would turn to alcohol when he was feeling manic, “and he decided to stop taking the medication. He would turn to alcohol when he was feeling manic, and less of each other. Frank began to spend even more time at the office and on the road. He reluctantly confessed that he’d had a number of affairs. He wasn’t sure whether his wife knew, but it was apparent that his behavior had affected their relationship. According to Frank, he and his wife had become like ships passing in the night. He admitted that he longed for their previous intimacy.

Coaching a Manic-Depressive
Serious mood disorders like manic depression are usually treated with a combination of psychotherapy and medication. The problem is, manic-depressives are rarely receptive to receiving treatment (and Frank was no exception). Their reality testing is impaired: Whether manic or depressed, they have poor insight into how they are perceived by and act toward others. Getting them to admit that they have a problem is a main challenge. Here, the best approach is the opposite of what you would do with narcissists: Make manic-depressives confront the reality of their relationships with others and work with the people they affect to create a new structure in which they can operate safely. In this kind of situation a coach would do well to draw on the help of others (in Frank’s case, his spouse and supporting executives).

Partners and family. I suggested to Frank that it would be useful to meet his spouse—an atypical exercise. He seemed eager to oblige, but when the results came back, feedback from a number of important people with whom he interacted (in particular, his subordinates) was missing. I asked him to do something about this, naming the people he should include.

As expected, the second report came back with sharply negative comments: Arnold never acknowledged his mistakes and always shifted responsibility for them to others. He broke promises and did not respect confidentiality. I let him make his own interpretation of the feedback, asking him how he experienced the information: What surprised him? What was fair and what was unfair? I knew that with people like Arnold you have to avoid arguments and head-to-head confrontations.

Despite my reservations, Arnold managed to convince his bosses that he had made progress, and they sent him to Southeast Asia to spearhead the firm’s expansion in that region. A year later I read in the financial press that the company had been involved in a major bribery scandal. Arnold had initiated a kickback operation in which he was one of the major beneficiaries.

The Incurable Executive
It’s hard to imagine that there are people who function without a conscience (except for the occasional historical tyrant or dictator). Nevertheless, sociopaths and psychopaths do exist, and they blend in very easily. Both types are the product of genetic and environmental factors, though sociopaths are more environmentally influenced while psychopathic disorders tend to be more hereditary and more dangerous. The bad news is that neither type of disorder can be cured.

I’ve learned from experience that psychopaths’ and sociopaths’ relationships with coaches usually take one of two forms. Individuals with these dysfunctions will either try to enlist the coach as an ally against the people who “forced” them to undergo treatment or try to impress the coach to gain some kind of advantage. In both cases they will “mirror” what you want them to be and claim that they have seen the error of their ways.

When I met Arnold, a highflier at a large consumer products company, he seemed really on the ball. He was good-looking, gregarious, and, not least, adept at sweet-talking me, but his deferential manner didn’t sit well with me. I began by suggesting that he undergo a 360-degree evaluation. He seemed eager to oblige, but when the results came back, feedback from a number of important people with whom he interacted (in particular, his subordinates) was missing. I asked him to do something about this, naming the people he should include.

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coaching request. But given her role in helping Frank stabilize his moods, I believed that it was essential to have his wife as an ally. To get his approval, I said it was important for me to know what her wishes and goals were, since he needed to better understand her perspective. After developing a working alliance with both of them, I explored with Frank various scenarios about how he saw himself in the future. What did he really want? Where would he like to be? Who would be a part of his life? Once Frank realized what was happening to his relationship with his family, he had an incentive to do something about his behavior.

Colleagues. At the same time, I talked to Frank’s executive team and a number of nonexecutive directors about what they felt was particularly disruptive about his behavior. Before I did, I got Frank’s permission, of course, explaining that I had to get a sense of how he was perceived in the organization. At first I talked to these stakeholders separately, but then I brought Frank into the discussions. In these conversations he began to recognize that he needed to play a different role in the company, one that got him away from day-to-day activities, where his penchant for micromanagement was causing stress. He decided to appoint a chief operations officer to handle those responsibilities. Frank recognized that his greatest contributions came from his contacts with important clients. That was where he should put his energy.

Even though they have trouble admitting it, manic-depressives (unlike narcissists) are at some level aware that they have a problem, which is why you can more easily confront them with the truth and work with them. Over six months I managed to help Frank figure out how to restructure his job, which helped him stabilize his mental state, both at work and at home. At the end he began working regularly again with a psychotherapist, and he has since begun to take medication.

THE PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE
This term describes a person who expresses negative feelings indirectly and shies away from confrontation. The behavior originates in families where the honest, direct expression of desires is forbidden; children quickly learn to repress their feelings and are very reluctant to be assertive. They go through life being outwardly accommodating but obstructive in an underhanded way. What’s more, their feelings may be so repressed that they don’t consciously realize that they’re being uncooperative. So when others get upset by their behavior, they take offense, because in their minds whatever caused the irritation was someone else’s fault.

How to Recognize the Condition
Though passive-aggressive executives overtly agree to requests, they covertly express their resentment of them by missing deadlines, showing up late for meetings, making excuses, or even undermining goals. They tend to use procrastination, inefficiency, and forgetfulness to avoid fulfilling obligations. Although they can become dysfunctional when pushed, if they’re not feeling pressured, they can produce high-quality work—which explains why some manage to reach senior executive positions. They themselves are usually the principal victims of their behavior. Take Mary, who was referred to me by a senior executive I had been working with for some time. He told me that he thought she had a lot of potential but somehow never delivered on that promise. Listening to his lament, I realized that I might be dealing with a passive-aggressive person, and my first meeting with Mary confirmed my suspicion. I experienced her as cold, passive, and even somewhat depressed.

When I asked about her colleagues and her boss, she described them as unreasonable. Whether she felt that she herself played a role in the poor chemistry was not apparent. Indeed, when I asked her why she was seeing me, she could not give a coherent answer. The only thing she could come up with was that her boss had told her it would be a good idea.
She didn’t seem to realize (in spite of having gone through a 360-degree feedback exercise) that others were perturbed by her behavior.

**Coaching a Passive-Aggressive**

Passive-aggressives need to resolve their hostility toward authority figures. To help them do that, the coach has to encourage transference. By getting Mary to see me as an authority figure, I would attract her anger, which would allow me to work on helping her express it in a healthier, direct manner. This work involved:

**Consistent confrontation.** Every time that Mary was passive-aggressive with me I’d say something like: “Mary, it seems to me that you are angry at me. Is that what you are experiencing?” I would also point out the inconsistencies in her behavior. Of course, she would resort to denial or evasion—often citing forgetfulness as an excuse when she hadn’t done what she was supposed to—but it became increasingly difficult for her to get away with it. I was always careful, however, to accept her defensive reactions for the time being. When dealing with people like Mary, you should never argue or correct denials; just quietly back away, leaving them to reflect on your comments. Passive-aggressives see arguments as an invitation to cast themselves as victims, making you the bad guy, and they are very experienced at it. By sharing my awareness of her covert anger, I gave Mary the message that her style was not the way to deal effectively with interpersonal relationships.

**Practicing better behavior.** Passive-aggressives have low self-esteem, and the coach has to help them build it up. This is best done by getting them to practice directness and asking them to explain how they would resolve or improve situations they find themselves in. In the beginning Mary would hem and haw, but over time I persuaded her to stick her neck out. I also assigned her specific tasks, putting them in writing. If she didn’t deliver, I expressed my disappointment with her directly, factually, and unemotionally. I would say that I was confused by her behavior: Why did she keep doing what she was doing? Why not find a better way? If she wanted to continue our coaching sessions, such behavior needed to stop. At the same time, I devoted a considerable part of each session to acknowledging her strengths.

**Exploring the family.** Mary needed to recognize the causal relationship between her tendency to procrastinate and the resentment she felt toward the person making the request. Discussing her original family dynamics helped Mary understand why she was the person she was; it quickly came out that it had been very difficult for her to stand up to her authoritarian father. The analysis of her childhood

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**What’s the Difference Between Coaching and Therapy?**

People often ask this question, and they get various answers. Some claim that the distinction lies in time orientation—that coaching focuses on the present and the future while therapy looks more at the past. Others draw a line between the conscious (coaching) and the unconscious (therapy). Still others see psychotherapy as a long-term treatment, and coaching as a short-term intervention.

These all seem rather artificial distinctions to me. It’s fair, perhaps, to say that psychotherapists have more-intensive training in personality dynamics, while executive coaches focus more on the general work environment in which executives operate. But it’s my conviction that therapists can benefit from knowing more about the organizational world, and coaches without training in psychology would do well to acquire its basics. In my own work, when appropriate, I often move from past to present and from conscious to unconscious material. Both as a therapist and as a coach, I’ve had some assignments that were short and highly focused and others that lasted for years.
led to a general discussion of the way she dealt with authority figures—including me—and her frequent anger toward them, which she gradually came to acknowledge. Some of our discussions also centered on the way Mary dealt with her own family. We explored how her style affected her children—and what the consequences would be. After all, she wanted them to be happy, and the way she was treating them was no prescription for happiness.

Coaching passive-aggressives is exhausting. They’re irritating because they subtly show that they feel a sense of accomplishment when they’ve managed to frustrate you. It took a lot not to let Mary get to me. But as time passed, she took the first baby steps of trying to interact with people in a different way. She would practice expressing her irritation more directly and then report her successes and failures back to me. And because she generally liked the results, she gained the assurance to continue down the right path. Eventually, I expressed confidence that she could go on without my help. Thereafter, I saw her a few times to check that she had not fallen into her old habits.

The previous cases deal with executives who may be troublesome but can also be quite charismatic—the kind of people who don’t leave you emotionally untouched. But with the fourth type of pathology, a lack of feeling rather than an excess of it gives rise to difficulties.

The term psychiatrists use for these people is alexithymia, which comes from the Greek and means “no words for emotions.” Alexithymics are literal-minded, display little imagination, and typically are unable to describe or even recognize their feelings. This inability makes it difficult for them to interpret the many and often complex emotional signals they receive from others, which they perceive as dangerous, potentially uncontrollable forces.

That doesn’t mean alexithymics cannot be successful, particularly within large, bureaucratic organizations where playing safe, making the right noises, predictability, and relative inconspicuousness are rewarded. But in other kinds of organizations, they provide entirely the wrong role models for others. Since alexithymics don’t exude the dynamism, inspiration, or vision that a high-performing organization needs, it’s hard for them to motivate others. Having poor communication skills and being hard to read, they don’t get the best out of people. And because they have difficulty dealing with the unpredictable, they may get in the way of progress. Their emotional absence puts a negative stamp on an organization’s culture, discouraging creativity and innovation.

How to Recognize the Condition

One executive—let’s call him Robert—came to me because he felt he was at a dead end in his firm. Until recently, he had been quite successful in his career, but after changing jobs he seemed to hit a wall. When I asked about his new job, he mentioned that he felt uncomfortable with its lack of structure. It wasn’t clear to him what he was expected to do; there was a great fluidity in relationships and structures.

Robert had left a technical function in a governmental job to become the chief information officer of a private company, a position that required considerable interpersonal skills. Robert saw that he had difficulties integrating himself with the executive team. Not knowing what to do, he spoke with a colleague in HR, who suggested that he try to work on his emotional intelligence—the reason he came to me.

At our first meeting, I was struck by the mechanical manner in which Robert answered my open-ended questions—always completely matter-of-fact. From the way he talked about friends and family...
members, I also inferred that he did not have any intimate relationships. When I asked how he saw his future, his imagined scenario was devoid of any emotional content. His fantasy life and emotional memory seemed impaired.

When I asked how he felt under stress, he mentioned stomach pains, muscle tension, and headaches, but was unable to articulate the corresponding feelings. That’s typical of alexithymics: They feel physically unwell rather than recognize emotional reactions. It was clear that Robert didn’t understand why his body acted the way it did.

Despite their physical complaints, you should resist any temptation to recommend medical interventions to alexithymics. (Physicians, take note.) In Robert’s case, his doctor (obviously at her wit’s end) had sought to refer him to a psychiatrist or a psychotherapist, but he had not chosen that option.

**Coaching the Emotionally Disconnected**

Because alexithymics are not the most engaging clients, there’s a risk that their coaches will get bored, which may undermine their effectiveness. And there is no direct medication for this disorder, although antidepressants can help people with it focus on feelings and interpret inner experiences. With Robert, my goal was to gradually get him to recognize and react appropriately to emotions. Our engagement had two phases:

- **Fixing immediate problems.** What works best for me when dealing with people like Robert is first to explore and find solutions to their immediate interpersonal problems. To build a trusting relationship with Robert, therefore, I needed to help him become more effective in his day-to-day work environment, and in our initial sessions I focused on this. When I asked whether anything had recently happened at work that puzzled him, he mentioned the strange behavior of his new assistant, who had suddenly burst into tears in his office. When I pressed him on what he had felt when that happened, he said, “Not much.” It only gave him a headache. When I asked what he’d done to stop his assistant from crying, he said, “Nothing.” But he had asked her to return to her office. I asked whether it might have been more helpful to inquire what her problem was—and if there was anything he could do to help her. He responded that he hadn’t thought about it, but if such a situation recurred, he would try to follow my advice.

- **Describing the pain.** Once I’d built up Robert’s confidence in the coaching process, I started getting him to describe more-difficult encounters at work, pushing him to say which part of the experiences had caused him pain. When distress had manifested itself physically, we developed a story about these symptoms—why they happened, what they represented, and how they fit within the chain of events described. After many sessions, Robert began to recognize the link between his symptoms and emotionally disturbing events in his life. As we progressed, he displayed an increasing depth of feeling, and it dawned on him that sharing it with others would be beneficial in his work. He became more playful and less mechanical.

Other approaches can also work with alexithymics. I’ve found that group and family therapy can help coachees learn to recognize, tolerate, and verbalize the emotional spectrum. It gives them a chance to practice reflective self-observation. Behavioral techniques such as biofeedback, relaxation training, autogenic training, guided imagery, and hypnosis may also help. These techniques may give people with the disorder a sense of control over stressful responses, increasing their awareness of the relationship between bodily sensations and the events around them.

Like the Tin Man, who discovered that he had a heart, alexithymic executives can learn to deal with emotions. When they do, the change in how they relate to others goes a long way toward inspiring the best from their people, raising morale, and making their organizations more exciting places to work.

SIGMUND FREUD once told the novelist Stefan Zweig that all his life he had been “struggling with the demon”—the demon of irrationality. Executives who fail to recognize their irrational side are like ships facing an iceberg, forgetting that the greatest danger lies below the surface. Effective executives know how to combine reflection with action by using self-insight as a restraining force when the sirens of power beckon them. It is here that the executive coach can help by pointing out the extent to which unconscious, seemingly irrational processes affect behavior.


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