

Personality and the Workplace

Difficult Employees

Bonnie A. Osif

The very act of concern for others' well-being, it seems, creates a greater state of well-being within oneself.

—The Dalai Lama

No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.

—Eleanor Roosevelt

It probably is no coincidence that one of the most popular comic strips is *Dilbert*, the saga of a hapless engineer and his extremely dysfunctional workplace.¹ In addition to Dilbert, who seems to be both a good engineer and a well-meaning employee, characters include the angry but competent Alice, the never-working Wally, and the pointy-haired boss who is beyond the description of any few adjectives. The buzz of the television world was the Golden Globe awarded to the British show *The Office*, recently redone for American television with the same name and premise.² The office inhabitants of these shows are strangely funny, sad, and scary characters under the supervision of a totally clueless and crass boss. And we can't forget the cult classic *Office Space* that seems to be on at least several times every month, a movie that has given us new insight into both cubicle dwellers and the boss who lords over them.³ Last but far from least is the library comic *Unshelved*, the saga of a public library and its interesting crew of characters, including the technology-phobic Colleen, the hard-working director Mel, and the comic book-loving, cynical, work-avoiding Dewey.⁴ Rare would be the librarians who don't find this strip so real that there isn't a comic strip or two tacked to their bulletin board.

These five examples of dysfunctional workplaces range from an engineering firm to a paper company to a library. Why this obsession with the extremes of dysfunctional workplaces and the boss no one wants to work under? It could be that these examples are all funny. They may make us feel good about our own work environments; ours could

never be as bad as these. Or could they? Something about these stories must resonate, at least a little, to account for their popularity.

Even the best work environment will have some aspect that could be improved. Many of these less-than-perfect features can be traced to the characteristics of individuals who create a difficult situation. Some are minor and relatively easy to overlook, some can annoy for a period of time and pass, and others can create a situation as dramatically difficult to tolerate as those presented in our fictional examples.

There is a wealth of information on dysfunction in the workplace. In this column the focus will be on personality and its role in creating workplace environment.

The original idea for this column was formed while listening to an interview with Martha Stout, author of *The Sociopath Next Door*.⁵ Normally works that seem a little overly dramatic can be overlooked, but her presentation and the questions that were phoned into the National Public Radio talk show were so compelling that a look at the original resource was needed. While reviews of the book have been mixed, the result of that interview and a subsequent reading of the book clarified some previously disjointed observations. Some people do behave in ways that can damage (sometimes severely) others in the workplace and they can do this damage in ways that promote themselves. This might be the ultimate dysfunctional situation.

Stout's premise is that 4 percent of the population are sociopaths, defined as "an aberration in the ability to have and to appreciate real (noncalculated) emotional experience, and therefore to connect with other people within real (noncalculated) relationships."⁶ She states these are people without a conscience; "what distinguishes all of these people from the rest of us is an utterly empty hole in the psyche, where there should be the most evolved of all humanizing functions."⁷

While reserving judgment on the statistics and the fact that we all have met sociopaths (if truly 4 percent of the population is sociopathic we should have met quite a few), some of her examples may sound slightly familiar—the employees who bully, lie, or always solicit pity to get their



Bonnie A. Osif (bao2@psu.edu) is Assistant Engineering Librarian at Pennsylvania State University in University Park.

way, to name a few. Another type is those who have no compunction about using others to reach their goals or just don't seem to have any empathy for their fellow employees or patrons. Sociopaths or not, these personality types do make the workplace less enjoyable and can cause serious problems.

The book is written as a series of disturbing stories and takes little time to read. Due to patient confidentiality the stories are more or less composites of real situations. There are references in the notes at the back of the book. This is an interesting book and might open eyes to some of the difficult people we know and provide some supportive information for coping with them if they can't be avoided. Not directly related to the workplace but recommended for the perspective into a topic most of us never really consider.

Conscience propels us outward in the direction of other people

"It seemed everyone had somebody who was driving them crazy at work," say Alan A. Cavaiola and Neil J. Lavender, the authors of *Toxic Coworkers: How to Deal with Dysfunctional People on the Job*.⁸ *Toxic Coworkers* summarizes a number of personality types (the toxicity of the title) with clear descriptions, sample dialog, and ways to handle that personality disorder. The book looks at toxicity that can reside in coworker, supervisor, subordinate, or the organization itself. Very clearly written, well-referenced, and fascinating, this book is a must read for everyone. The types of disorders include the narcissist, perfectionist, and histrionic, as well as the antisocial, paranoid, borderline, dependent, passive-aggressive, avoidant, and schizoid personalities. Even if your workplace is peaches and cream, the book will shed some light on the range and depth of personality disorders that are intriguing even in the abstract and will provide a basis for understanding these issues if the situation ever does arise. The text is so interesting the book can almost be read as a novel.

Barrick states in *Personality and Work*, "The idea for this book is based on the notion that we all have personalities, and those personalities affect our behavior at work."⁹ The three main points covered in the book are, what is personality, how does it affect behavior, and how does it affect work? The book provides a brief background of personality research that includes Allport's definition of personality as "the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his unique adjustments to his environment"¹⁰ and a description of the Big Five of personality research (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness to experience), referred to in subsequent chapters.

Several chapters are especially recommended. "The Happy Worker" is a look at the complex relationship

between worker happiness and workplace productivity, creativity, and efficiency. The assumption probably would be a happy worker is the best type of worker, but outcomes such as careful work and productivity may be adversely affected. Noting much more work needs to be done on this area of study, the chapter does provide a great deal for the manager to consider. "Toward a Better Understanding of the Relationship between Personality and Individual Job Performance" discusses the Big Five as they relate to job performance. Using charts and diagrams, the authors provide a good introduction to this complex and very important topic.

Possibly the one chapter no one wants to need, yet is extremely important to too many managers, is "Personality and Counterproductive Workplace Behavior" (CWB). It discusses predictors of CWBs and some preliminary CWB studies. The authors state in their conclusion, "We have argued that personality traits may exert their causal influence by initiating, both directly and indirectly, the occurrence of counterproductive behaviors and by moderating the relationship between organizational events and perceptions of job satisfaction, stress, and injustice and these perceptions and counterproductive behaviors."¹¹

Very heavy reading with a number of references, this book is for those who really need a detailed, scholarly study of the issue. Yet, the ideas presented are interesting and might provide the insight necessary for understanding and dealing with difficult situations.

A conference in 1999 brought together personality psychologists and industrial/organizational (I/O) psychologists to look at the interface of these two fields that normally have little interaction. *Personality Psychology in the Workplace* is a collection of the papers from that conference.¹²

Personality is defined as both the "distinctive impression a person makes on others" (an observer perspective) and the "structures inside a person that explain why he or she creates a particular impression on others" (an actor perspective).¹³

The book has three topics, personality and the I/O interface, measurement and assessment, and emerging themes. Each entry is supported with extensive bibliographies and a number of charts that help illustrate the points. There are several chapters that are of particular interest. These include "Moral Integrity in Leadership," "Personality at Work: Criterion-Focused Occupational Personality Scales Used in Personnel Selection," "The Personality Hierarchy and the Prediction of Work Behaviors," and "Ego Depletion, the Executive Function, and Self-Control."

The book is heavy reading and really provides more conceptual background information for those interested in this subject, rather than practical information that will be applied in the library. However, it does provide a deeper understanding for those willing to take the time to study this book and it might have some influence on the way employees are viewed.

**Conscience . . . makes friends
keep their promises . . . takes to
the streets to protest a war . . . makes the
human rights worker risk her very life**

“Difficult individuals are often described as having an attitude problem. Can the same thing also be said of an entire work organization?”¹⁴ This intriguing question begins *Can a Work Organization Have an Attitude Problem? The Impact of Workplaces on Employee Attitudes and Economic Outcomes*, a short study of surveys of about two hundred branches of a bank, conducted by the National Bureau of Economic Research. The results indicate that there are definite workplace personalities and they affect how the people at that workplace perceive their job and the workplace. Those workplaces “with less favorable attitudes have higher turnover, lower levels of productivity, and lower rates of productivity growth.”¹⁵

While this study was done within branches of a bank, both libraries and banks are service organizations that have face-to-face dealings with a large number of people, and the attitude of the service providers has a great effect on the success of the unit. It is no secret that a bad library experience can have a long-term and broad effect on library patrons. The results of this study should be considered for implications in the library.

Some of the findings are that “employee attitudes are shaped in distinctive ways by the place of work” and “have their own distinctive attitudes.” These attitudes have a significance because they are “predictors of higher employee turnover, lower levels of sales, and lower rates of subsequent sales growth” concepts that in the library may translate into turnover, fewer patrons, less and shorter use. The report concludes “there are happy and unhappy workplaces, as well as happy and unhappy workers, with very different patterns of turnover and productivity in these workplaces.”¹⁶

Interesting research is cited that only whets the appetite for more information. This short booklet is well worth the time to study and can lead to additional, useful investigations. This work might result in careful consideration of the units of your library that are less successful, as well as a look at those that have low turnover and positive patrons. Definitely worthwhile reading.

Counterproductive Work Behavior was written from two perspectives.¹⁷ The first is of the “actor” or the person who is performing the counterproductive behavior. The second looks at the “target” of that behavior. While comprised of fascinating scenarios that delve into complex work situations, this is very heavy reading with copious references. *CWB* is recommended for those with a very strong interest or need to explore this issue.

On another very serious note, *Antisocial Behavior in Organizations* looks at issues such as theft, sabotage, whistle-blowing, and revenge in the workplace.¹⁸ The authors’ goal is to encourage at least beginning-level information for

managers so they can identify and begin to handle some of the behaviors that can occur in the workplace. Each of the various types of behavior is covered in a short chapter. The subjects covered in this book are somewhat different than the other titles; some of these topics may be ones of particular interest. It is worth taking a look.

. . . genuine conscience changes the world

Civility is a trait some might say is sorely lacking in the society in general. An entire column was devoted to the topic in 2001. A number of authors have written specifically on this topic as it relates to the workplace. Pearson, Andersson, and Wegner collected data over four year in the forms of discussion and focus groups, questionnaires, interviews, and a forum. In their article, “When Workers Flout Convention: A Study of Workplace Incivility,” they state, “Unchecked incivility tends to foster an uncivil organizational climate. Uncivil behaviors tend to multiply when there is little or no chance of negative repercussion. . . . [T]he effect of incivility may be long lasting and alienating”¹⁹ The article clearly points out the seriousness of the topic. Sypher also investigates the topic and provides a short but good summary of the problem and the consequences of incivility in her article, “Reclaiming Civil Discourse in the Workplace.”²⁰ Of special note is the figure that indicates a “graph” of uncivil behaviors. If this is a special interest, Cortina et al., Andersson and Pearson, and Johnson and Indvik have written articles that can provide additional information on this crucial aspect of workplace environment.²¹

Another unfortunate topic that must be considered is workplace aggression and violence. For a look at these topics *Aggressive Behavior* has two articles to introduce this issue.²² While a distasteful topic, it is one that some managers may need to address. Consider these articles and periodically search issues of the journal for other pertinent titles.

In the preface of *Behavior Mismatch* Mann states, “An organization is like a giant jigsaw puzzle. . . . When one or more of the pieces is not a good match for the rest of the puzzle, a behavior mismatch may develop.”²³ With a goal of providing information to address mismatches, this short book follows the popular style of presenting scenarios and then discussion of the issues illustrated in that scenario.

Behavior mismatch can present a number of problems. The costs are the time and money issues of termination of employees, hiring, retraining, loss of productivity, effectiveness, and lower morale. “The goal is to develop the skill of stepping outside the situation to ask” what is happening, why it is happening, and then using this understanding to take positive action.²⁴

Chapters cover diagnosing the mismatches, self-esteem issues, personality types, leadership, supervision, human resource issues, counseling, and termination. Each

chapter has a short bibliography and very useful bulleted summaries. Interesting and insightful, it is definitely worth a look.

For a somewhat different perspective, take a look at *The Cult of Personality*.²⁵ The subtitle sets the stage—*How Personality Tests Are Leading Us to Miseducate Our Children, Mismanage Our Companies, and Misunderstand Ourselves*. The book looks at the problems, costs, and failures of different personality tests. Many employers, educational institutions, and individuals rely to one extent or another on these tests to predict or describe aptitudes, interests, and life choices. Paul reviews phrenology, Rorschach inkblot test, Minnesota Multiphasic Personal Inventory, Thematic Appreciation Test, Myers-Briggs, Draw a Person, NEO Personality Inventory, and more. Each is described with a historical context, information about the inventors, and how the tests were developed and used.

Paul is a very harsh critic of tests that most of us have taken. We tend to take the results for granted, assuming the test is well-studied, valid, reliable, and useful. However, she states, “Our society is making crucial decisions—whether a parent should receive custody of a child, whether a worker should be offered a job, whether a student should be admitted to a school or special program—on the basis of deeply flawed information. If these tests serve anyone well, it is not individuals but institutions. . . . Personality tests do their dirty work, asking intrusive questions and assigning limiting labels, providing an ostensibly objective rationale to which testers can point with an apologetic shrug.”²⁶

Basically, Paul says the tests don’t benefit the taker but the organization requiring them, and the results of the tests are suspect at best. Most tests simply don’t have the underpinnings to do what they state they can do.

A fascinating look at the tests that can be used to potentially explain some of the people in the workplace, problem or not, that is fast and easy reading. While not necessary, it reads like a novel, is very interesting, and might provide some interesting insight. It will most likely make you consider the purpose of taking the test and question the results.

[Conscience] makes individual lives better and increases human dignity overall

Stating that great managers motivate, innovate, mentor, and deal with problem employees, the *Harvard Business Review (HBR)* has collected a number of case studies from the publication for *When Good People Behave Badly What Will You Do?*²⁷ Topics covered include individuals who do not delegate, have temper tantrums and indiscretions in their private life, bully, and commit acts of violence. After the description of the case study there are short explanations from the parties involved in this particular situation followed by comments from several experts that directly address the problem.

While none of the settings is the library, there may be library situations that are very similar to some of the ones detailed in this book. Fast, interesting reading, this is highly recommended. Consider the viewpoints of the experts and then consider what your action would be. Someday this mental exercise may be useful in a practical situation.

Another *HBR* title, *The Results-Driven Manager: Dealing with Difficult People* looks at situations big and small in which the right action may not be easy to discern. Some reactions are obvious; other reactions more obtuse. Theft or violence carry strong penalties, but “if you can’t fire an employee for complaining or whining, what can you do?”²⁸

Points noted for consideration include emotional and interpersonal skills, planning so a problem can be addressed before it becomes a major problem and results in unwelcome actions, as well as the ability to know when to get outside help. Sixteen contributors each write a short chapter that looks at ways to address the problem situation as a behavior problem rather than one of character or personality. The latter are more difficult to change.

“By applying the techniques described in this book, you’ll not only benefit your company; you’ll also sharpen your own skills and help those supposedly ‘difficult people’ realize their full potential. Everyone wins.”²⁹ Commendable goals! Short, readable book from *HBR*. The comments and the perspectives can be very helpful. This book and the earlier *HBR* title might be especially useful when read and discussed with fellow managers.

In *Personality at Work: The Role of Individual Differences in the Workplace*, Furnham discusses the role of psychology and testing in recruitment, training, and selection of employees.³⁰ The book uses charts and bulleted points and explains the concepts so even a non-psychology major can fully understand. The book would be most useful for a person in human resources to better understand employees, personality differences, and success in the workplace. While not necessary reading, the book is recommended for those with a need or interest in this area of study.

Following the typical Nolo Press format of sidebars, bullets, charts, cartoons, and easy-to-follow information, *Dealing with Problem Employees* provides guidance for handling difficult employees.³¹ While most larger libraries will probably have detailed policies for these situations and legal counsel to advise them during each step of the process, this book could be a very good reminder for some libraries.

Could some of your problem employees be difficult or failing for reasons that are attributable to their managers? Manzoni and Barsoux investigate this idea in *The Set-Up-to-Fail Syndrome*. They state, “We wrote this book to help people in positions of authority, particularly bosses, become more effective in the management of their subordinates, particularly their perceived weaker performers.”³² The job of a manager has never been easy.

They are “torn between wanting to empower employees and making sure that those employees can deliver on commitments; they want to show consideration toward subordinates without encouraging complacency; and they want to push for performance without alienating their subordinates.”³³ One of the problems of management is how to deal with the under-performer, especially since it is noted in the book that workers who think they are perceived poorly will “live down to that image.”³⁴ Interesting and not full of jargon, this book provides a great deal to think about. Recommended.

[Conscience] is real and compelling

While all of the examples that began this study are humorous, there is little funny about working with or for difficult people. Managing them can be a precarious balancing act of considering difficult individuals, the effect on their coworkers, the workplace and clients, as well as the legal issues involved. Most difficulties at work are temporary and correctable. Few are as serious as the sociopathy discussed earlier. While there was a happy solution in the movie *Office Space*, Dilbert still works for the pointy-haired boss with no relief in sight, Mel still can't get Colleen to use the computer or Dewey to be more than slightly civil to the patrons, and the American version of *The Office* went into hiatus with the manager as oblivious to both his insensitivity and the attitudes of his subordinates as ever. In real life, most managers are much better than their fictional counterparts—thank goodness! But our laughter every morning at Dilbert or with Dewey should remind us that difficult people, from the minor annoyance to the seriously hostile or dangerous, can inhibit our workplace and their behaviors have far-reaching and serious consequences. We learn a great deal from humor, but these serious studies may provide the assistance needed if a situation strays into the realm of unfunny reality. As Stout concludes, “I am most impressed by those individuals who feel, quite simply, that hurting others is wrong and that kindness is right, and whose actions are quietly directed by this moral sense every day of their lives.”³⁵ Thank goodness that is the vast majority of the people we work with and meet.

Author's note: Headers taken from Martha Stout, The Sociopath Next Door: The Ruthless Versus the Rest of Us (New York: Broadway Books, 2005).

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Key Actions of the LAMA Board of Directors

These are the key actions of the LAMA Board of Directors taken during two sessions at its 2004 Annual Conference Meeting. (Housekeeping votes are not included.)

- * Approved the final FY 2006 budget.
- * Directed the LAMA councilor to report to ALA Council the board's decision that LAMA does not have the legal expertise or responsibility to fulfill the requirements described in ALA Policy 54.6 related to fair employment practices compliance; however, LAMA will continue to provide programming, workshops, and publications in this area. LAMA supports consideration of this compliance becoming part of the role of ALA-APA.
- * Approved the concept and content of the list of fifteen programs and three preconferences for the 2006 Annual Conference in New Orleans.
- * Approved changing the name of the HRS Supervisory Skills Committee to Leadership Skills Committee, along with a new charge.
- * Approved renaming the LAMA Publications Committee to Publishing Committee to reflect an emphasis on action.
- * Dissolved the Cultural Diversity Committee and established the Cultural Diversity Interest Group.
- * Established the Cultural Diversity Award Committee to administer the Cultural Diversity Grant.
- * Dissolved the Ethnic Affiliates Liaison Program and charged the Cultural Diversity Interest Group to work with ALA Ethnic Affiliates.
- * Changed the name of the LOMS Comparative Library Organization Committee to the Organizational Theory and Practice Committee.
- * Created the BES Library Interior Design Awards Committee to administer the joint ALA-International Interior Design Association (IIDA) awards program for recognition of excellence in library interior design.
- * Established the LAMA Education Interest Group.
- * Established the LAMA Government Affairs Interest Group.
- * Established the LAMA Research Interest Group.
- * Established the MAES Discussion Group.
- * Endorsed the principles of the draft Council "Resolution on the USA PATRIOT Act and Libraries."
- * Approved a \$3,000 expenditure from the New Initiatives Fund, \$1,500 transfer of interest from the Endowment Fund, and a campaign to raise \$3,000 to support the next round of LAMA Leaders of the Pack.
- * Created a task force to investigate the transition of LA&M to fully electronic format, with a timeline and business plan to be presented at the 2006 Annual Conference.
- * Revised the LAMA Policy on Executive Director expenditure authorization to raise the limit to \$1,000 of unallocated funds that may be spent without Budget and Finance Committee approval.
- * Approved changing the criteria for the LAMA Leadership and President Awards from "outstanding contributions to the goals of LAMA" to "outstanding contributions and support to LAMA and LAMA sections or committees."
- * Create a liaison position from LAMA SASS to RUSA STARS.