



# LEADER CAPITAL

LEADING POSITIVE CHANGE

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## High maintenance staff

I once spoke to a senior executive from Dell who said *"I spend more time solving problems for one staff member than I do with my 7 year old son"*.

Managing people through conflict and change plus juggling a range of personality types is one of the most pressing issues managers will face according to a survey conducted by Leader Capital in Dec 2009. Anyone who has managed others knows that it can be the most difficult and time consuming part of a manager's role. Increasing staff performance requires support from all stakeholders; including those at the top.

Leader Capital surveyed over 50 Managers, from team leaders to CEO's to determine the challenges faced by managers during 2009. Predictably the majority of challenges were around *people issues*. Previous research has shown that managers are often taken back by the needs of the staff they are responsible for. Like being a parent or in a relationship, it would be useful to understand the amount of personal learning involved before starting in the role. But like most of life, it tends to creep up on us and is learnt through bitter experience.

All private and public organisations will hold a certain percentage of challenging staff issues. From our experience if you have more than 5 people in your team and there is not one conflict, personal mismatch or high maintenance member of the team then you are either *witnessing a miracle* or you fully understand and apply professionally coaching within your team.

High maintenance staff can range from those who need your continual approval to people who regularly make operational mistakes; from personalities that don't fit the team culture to people with unrelated personal issues that impact everyone around them.

In an attempt to recognise and alleviate some of the people issues we have compiled a list of challenging personality types that may be familiar to you. Whilst delivering professional development to hundreds of managers we have identified and categorised some characters we have experienced in our management role/s. We offer our reflections and present them in the form of case studies and tips on how to approach these 'people issues'. We hope this might illuminate some of your challenges and then alleviate them through our suggested solutions.

The research revealed the issues around people range from cynical or dysfunctional teams to predictable communication breakdowns. Some personality types that may contribute to this include:

- The resistant staff member
- The delusional staff member
- The bitter and twisted
- The faction
- The needy

Lets start with one of the most complex personality types; the resistant:

## The resistant

The resistant member of staff is certainly one of most illusive and complex in the list of people we find difficult to manage. They could be divided into a number of subcategories including; *the fearful, the passive aggressive or even the paranoid*. However the resisters are recognisable by how they will spend much of their energy resisting your directions, misinterpreting them and engaging in low priority tasks.

Resistance may be due to changes occurring in the workplace (fear) or new tasks they have been allocated. They may simply be in the wrong job or they be rebelling against *you* as their manager. Often the resister has been overlooked for a job they wanted and their behaviour is a reaction to their disappointment.

What we have found is that people that resist requests rarely divulge the real reason for their resistance, if they even know themselves. They will justify and attribute their inaction to someone or something in the workplace. So take an educated guess if you must but it is unlikely you will ever uncover the source of a staff members resistance.

These individuals may go unnoticed by others but not by their manager or direct line of report. They can be personable at times but when asked to co operate or to take initiative they reveal their discomfort by blocking instructions.

They will use delay tactics by exaggerating timeframes to complete work or less creative 'resisters' have high absenteeism and don't return emails or calls in a timely manner. Some attend meetings or workshops not directly relevant to their role while *proactive resisters* will outwardly argue against any direct request. Resisters are very good at manoeuvring their responsibilities around so as it would take you some time to understand where they are up to. Regardless of their approach the result will be that you will need to spend time monitoring or arguing to get the work you need them to complete on time.

Resisters will not normally approach a problem head on, as they are not necessarily after a solution but wish to be left alone and not be told what to do. When this happens, the work team becomes a battle of the egos instead of a productive team. Sound familiar?

### Case Study

*A colleague of mine talked about how he and the entire team resented their boss as she was what he described as "totally incompetent". According to him she micro managed the team and divided her time between keeping favour with more senior managers and accepted jobs for her team with impossible timeframes. She did not lead by example as she arrived late, left early and used work hours to conduct her personal affairs. Whilst these complaints were widespread and seemed to be valid, my interest*

*was in the reaction of the team. Because there was a power imbalance very few of them ever confronted the situation, no matter how bad things got. Instead they chose to sabotage her in ways that were hard to define.*

*One particular staff member admitted to withholding information; exchanging private emails with customers who discredited her and to continually undermine her credibility to other staff. The relationships between her and her team had become impossible and while most left a few stayed and waited to see who will retire, be retrenched, transfer or resign first. As their manager she must have noticed their resistance but did not take action to alleviate the tension within her team.*

This behaviour damages all stakeholders including the organisation they work for. It is a 'misappropriation of energy'. Time and energy is wasted by individuals not confronting the workplace relationship issues. The time that should be allocated to work related activities is spent on the blame game, sabotage and hallway gossip.

Obviously one solution would have been to escalate to a more senior manager who could attempt to rectify a team who had become dysfunctional. By spending too much of their personal and professional energy on unrelated matters they are costing their employer revenue through a reduction in performance.

#### **Tips on how to deal with the resister;**

1. If the resister works well without supervision keep the focus on output and be sure to check your own ego at the door. The *resister* maybe very competent in their role and their issue may only with their manager. If this is the case then allowing them some autonomy may work wonders. This person cannot be micro managed. They will work well when given responsibility or an important project. Have it monitored periodically by someone who is qualified to do so. Remember, the result you are looking for is 'performance' not compliance.
2. If the *resister*' does not perform well unsupervised then adopt a more measured strategy. Here the manager will have no choice but to confront concerns with relevant staff. Check their actions with HR before the meeting but if permitted, and when there is an issue significant enough, uncover the impact their resistance is having on their productivity. You cannot confront them on any other grounds as you are not a psychologist and bringing up issues unrelated to their output may be misinterpreted. It's sounds trite, but a win/win or even a win / ½ win is better than living with unnecessary stress. Be the better man, even if you're a woman.

3. Remember to choose your battles carefully, If not, the cost of their dissatisfaction maybe working overtime to sabotage you. If you think I am exaggerating then you haven't been in the workforce very long.
  
4. Often we convince ourselves that resistant behaviour is affecting productivity and that the problem is solely with them. It is obviously affecting performance but it is also *affecting* us. It takes someone with high emotional intelligence to take a helicopter view and assess peoples output and to come up with a way to put the goals of the company before the need for an obedient staff member. It is very difficult to manage a highly *resistant* individual unless you give in to some of their demands. This approach may seem like a short term solution however it may be more productive to let the resister win one battle, this could just help you achieve your goals and if that is the case, you will have won the war.

The above case study taught me to try and see things from the 'resisters' point of view. Individuals within the team confessed that resistance appeared to be *their* only solution. Of course it was not the only solution but the only alternative may be to find other employment. When the dysfunctional manager has the support of a more senior manager, the road to a solution can be long and hard.

To not leave will often result in individuals becoming ill as a result of ongoing frustration and stress. Prolonged stress will not only take a toll on your personal and professional life but the potential for critical damage to your health is a very underestimated factor in today's work environment.

# The delusional

The delusional staff member doesn't get it. They are the people who believe they are indispensable employees but in fact, are operational under achievers. To supervise them would be incredibly time consuming so many managers simply allocated them a role where they will do the least harm. They appear confident however this confidence is often bravado masking hidden inadequacies. What is surprising is a total lack of self awareness. They either take no responsibility for contributing to the overall business goals or they believe they already contribute adequately. Like the blind where other senses are often heightened the delusional have likely developed soft skills to mask their limited operational abilities.

They may be good talkers or and have developed a relationship with someone influential. They often take the credit for other people's ideas out of necessity and *can* be excellent self-promoters. Despite their complaints of being overworked we never see the corresponding output. Although we cannot rely on them for any real outcomes we often cannot discard them either.

The delusional often remain in these jobs because they are afraid they won't measure up elsewhere or have reached a certain age and feel it's too late to move on. They may be protected by the system that governs the organisation (government employee) or be a long term employee for a private organisation (expensive payout). Of course they may be completely delusional and believe that they are actually good at what they do! What ever the reason, these are people whose ambition outweighs their abilities.

Actions speak louder than words and like all these issues, avoid them at your own peril

## Case Study

*It was about 15 years ago I worked with a man who exhibited this lack of self awareness. He was incredibly likable and his personality did make up for many of his inadequacies for most people. But not for those who depended on his output.*

*He spent time a lot of time developing relationships up and down the hierarchy instead of performing his management tasks. Any outcomes were initiated by his subordinates despite the fact he gave very little, if any direction. In short, he appeared to have virtually no experience or business training and he lacked the ability to execute any plans he was responsible for.*

*By all accounts he did believe in his own heart that he had great ideas and managed to deflect any criticisms onto what he considered to be the incompetence of more senior managers.*

*At the time I was an outsider but could see how wasteful it was to the organisation. He is still there today and in fact has managed to be promoted over time into a similar role.*

### **Tips for managing the delusional**

1. Stay focused on their work, not what they say. It may not seem appropriate to compare their output with others but at some point their performance will need to be measured. You should stay closer to this employee but be sure the focus remains on their outcomes not the personality of the individual.
2. If their output is significantly less than expected or requires constant attention and supervision discuss the required (minimum) output for that role with them and offer assistance if they are struggling. If this is not feasible then you can suggest moving them to a more suitable role within the company; we all have weaknesses and helping each employee to play to their strengths is part of your role.
3. Very skilled managers will develop trust with their employees by coaching them on a regular basis and uncovering the strengths of their staff. The goal is always to build enough trust so that the employee identifies their own strengths and shortfalls. If you can get to this point the staff member may confess their weaknesses and put them on the table for discussion, at this point (a long hard road) a mutual solution is possible. Those people who are trying to hide their weaknesses however would need an exceptional manager who has invested the time to bring them to this conclusion.
4. Offer praise when required but point out areas that need improvement in equal measure. Ask permission to monitor these incremental improvements over a fixed time period. If things do improve marginally, you may just be getting as much as you will ever get from this person and need to accept it.

It's important to remember that these people are often someone who is uncomfortable in their role. They may be serving time till the day they can retire and breathe easy.

## The bitter and twisted

I used to think people who carried bitterness around were rare or certainly not common enough to mention as a personality 'type' but as I move from public to private enterprise in my professional development role I hear that just about every manager with any experience has encountered someone similar. Most people who exhibit dysfunctional or hostile behaviour seem to have some grievance with the company, their work role, their manager or they may be masking some personal pain that will impact every person they are in contact with.

Unfortunately the bitter employee will change the focus of the team's performance and the energy of the group. Work tasks becomes secondary to some peoples personal need to grind their axe. Bitterness chews through positive energy like a bush fire in a dry paddock. Over time a negative work culture will develop and there will be real and quantifiable costs to the company.

### Case Study 1

*I was asked to manage a project some years back and inherited a team leader who could be described as bitter and twisted. After just a couple of weeks I noticed she was not able to retrieve the reports I needed to understand the job. I noticed there was a revolving door of staff leaving almost as quickly as they arrived. It took about 8 weeks to uncover the extent of the problem and as suspected it was due to some unrelated personal issues of the team leader and no other staff member could work with her. I introduced morning meetings with her to understand the reason for the high staff turnover and her unco-operative behaviour upon my arrival.*

(Please note, before commencing down this road be sure such close monitoring isn't considered discriminatory.)

*She claimed she was far too busy to meet daily and that her workload was preventing her accessing the reports that I needed. I tried to understand her role and discover what, if anything, I could do to alleviate or at least understand her role. She resigned within 6 months of my arrival and as the high turn over of staff settled down I realised the extent of the issues were more personally related than work related. As mentioned above, focusing on the problem will reap positive long term results yet I can't deny it will certainly cause short term grief.*

## Case Study 2

*When I had my second child there was a nurse in the ward that did not embody the usual gentle approach to new born babies. She was rough when handling babies and I noticed her behaviour towards the new mums was aggressive. She looked very unhappy which is unusual in a maternity ward where most people are happy as they welcome a new child into their lives and the nursing staff usually reflect this positive ambience.*

*One morning she dropped my new baby into the crib so hard that the jolt woke her and the baby began to cry. Obviously I complained about this nurse and was told that she had lost her own baby some years before.*

*23 years later I was giving a seminar on 'child protection' to a group in that area and there she was in the crowd, the same nurse. She worked at the same hospital and the bitterness on her face had hardly changed as she sat with her arms folded and looking as bitter and unhappy as she did all those years before. Obviously this staff member had issues beyond the workplace and her attitude and behaviour reflected this. I can say it took all my strength not to mention to her in our break how I recognised her.*

### **Tips for managing the bitter and twisted**

The solution lies in your objective awareness of the situation.

1. Bitter people make everyone unhappy and their impact will suck all productive energy out of the team. Even though they can really press your hot buttons you need to remove any emotional reaction and become solutions focused just as you would with any workplace problem. Your first step is to shift from how they are affecting you and others to understanding how they are affecting the business. Only then can you focus on developing a solution to the problem.
2. Outlining your intention to increase morale, productivity or teamwork directly to this person or the entire team is a proactive step. If anyone is threatened by this they may voice their concerns at that point but our experience is that difficult personalities don't voice their concerns so openly. If you can put your grievances aside and endeavour to chip away at the problem through ongoing and regular communication either individually or as a group you will be surprised at the outcomes. Remember 'misery needs company' and once you have the majority of the group on board, the one or two difficult personality types normally fall into line or move on.

3. Only when the problems have been uncovered will they be worked through. Managers at all levels need to become very comfortable with understanding more about human behaviour. Often managers weren't chosen for the position on that basis but in the end it's the main management skill. Cooperation and support from those around you will drive performance and you should devote at least 50% of your role to helping others become high performers. If the staff member is protected in some way or chooses not to leave then prepare yourself by moving to plan B. Stay within the legislative guidelines and ensure 'right' is on your side.

As a manager your goal is to get the highest possible performance out of your team and any member/s who are affecting this performance need to be dealt with. No I don't mean hire a hit man, I mean confronting the situation professionally. Although we are not all psychologists management does include some degree of understanding human behaviour and the more you learn about this the easier your job will be. If you are a manager I strongly suggest that you read the '7 Habits of Highly Successful People' by Stephen Covey if you haven't already and also 'Coaching For Performance' by John Whitmore.

## The faction

A collection of unhappy people in your team is a major concern. Such a group can place an entire department in jeopardy and reflect badly on you and the team's outcomes. When faced with this problem, you will need to take action quickly and resist any temptation to distance yourself from them. The more dysfunctional the team, the more attention is needed.

As a coach I regularly hear executives complain about staff that are difficult to manage but if these complaints extend to the majority of staff in their department/s my alarm bells go off. Perhaps they inherited this group and need to find a solution to improve staff morale or they will need to take ownership of the problem and uncover the source of the collective dissatisfaction.

The good news is most groups can be turned around to be a functioning and productive team who engage with one another within 6 – 12 months.

### Case Study

*Once I coached a group of consultants who were operating within a leadership vacuum. They had little to no engagement with one another and no common goal/s. Individually they would approach their manager and complain about their colleagues until it became obvious that something needed to happen. Smaller factions had developed which split the group into pairs and individuals over the years and an undercurrent of resentment had crept into the minds and hearts of the people who worked there.*

*This happens when a group that has been left without direction or whose manager has adopted a dictatorial and/or competitive environment; for example a disconnected sales group.*

*Left unattended this group had developed a list of negative perceptions about their existence within the company. They believed they were seen as superfluous to the core goals, they felt unappreciated by the other departments, other managers and even their customers. No targets were set, they were not involved in decision making and their previous managers were either unavailable to them or only interested in the bottom line, not realising that staff engagement is the only way to increase the bottom line.*

I was the coach for the above example and within 6 months their manager could see positive results through regular group coaching sessions, a refocus on work practices and within 12 months the targets, set by the consultants themselves, were exceeded.

### **Tips on managing the faction**

1. One or two difficult personalities is not unusual, but an entire department who are dissatisfied means there has been some serious miscommunication. Investigate the reasons for the negativity and try to suspend judgement until you understand the root cause. Ask yourself how you communicate with your team. Why has this developed?
2. Here you will need to be the 'hero' and take a back seat so you can analyse the relevant steps required to improve this team. Start by offering constant communication through more regular meetings or one to one 'catch ups'. Offering them the time and freedom to express their dissatisfaction, then coming to a workable solution will take a great deal of patience and skill. Don't expect any real change for about 90 days, by then the storm will have passed and the team will start to cooperate, perhaps for the first time.
3. If the dissatisfaction is caused, as it so often is, by changes within the workplace that the group inevitably has to accept, give them time to grieve over what has been lost, time to express their anger, and help them move on.

## The needy

Those that constantly seek approval are people who are not sure that their work is pleasing you. They need validation and will continue to seek your approval until you offer it lavishly. If this approval is not forthcoming their need will intensify and the impact will affect both yourself and the rest of the team.

You will recognise the 'needy' staff member by their endless discussions or complaints around every aspect of their work or their constant need to express dissatisfaction with 'management'. These may be signs that their need for validation or consultation has not been met.

These people can and do spread negativity within the team by verbalising their dissatisfaction or circulating complaints about *management*. We hear hallway conversations around how they are in a thankless job or how, "we never even get so much as a thank you" or "there is no communicate skills". As time goes by you can be sure the list of criticisms will grow.

Sometimes the employee is not so much needy but overly social. The social employee likes daily catch ups or chats due to their outgoing nature. They are friendly and may even feel some level of rapport with you, however keeping some level of professional distance is always advisable. You and you alone will need to outline your availability given your own work schedule.

The needy often keep impeccable files and systems around their work station to engage in activities they can easily control. To increase their performance we need them to move into action, take initiative and contribute and focus on the organisations business goals.

Or they may be 'people pleasers' who have a need to ensure the entire workplace likes them. This can be a delightful trait initially, but when productivity is replaced by arranging birthday celebrations, outings and unrelated personal activities which distract them from their main work tasks it needs to be managed. It has been our experience that these people are no longer stimulated by their work and are looking for every possible distraction.

### **Case Study**

*We once hired a support person who was responsible for assisting 3 Directors within our unit and during her first year appeared to be the answer to all our prayers. She took initiative, had finished our requests before we expected them and suggested better ways of streamlining our processes. She had real initiative and self focus. As her first year drew to a close we knew we had to renew her contract. She had made herself indispensable in our eyes.*

*After the gloss had worn off however she started to slide in certain areas and favoured completing the work for only one of the three Directors and neglected the other two. After about 18 months there was an increase in absenteeism and a distinct reluctance to offer even the most basic support not to mention the standard we were used to getting.*

*We decided that one of us needed to meet with her to uncover the drop in her support. Her feedback told us that we had reduced the amount of positive feedback she had become used to. She had set the bar so high but after some time passed we became complacent and we 'expected' her to solve so many of our problems.*

*Just as we had become dependant on the support, she had become dependant on our regular positive feedback. Her need for validation was no longer being met.*

*We needed her to return to that focused and self motivated person she once was so we introduced performance management practices and developed a win/win scenario for both her and us. **We** had to change and offer her feedback for the work she did well and provide her extra responsibilities (with the commensurate pay). She is still there today however we have all moved on.*

The *needy* staff member may be in the least stimulating job or be in the wrong job altogether. If you have a staff member who is busy performing jobs that are unrelated to increasing productivity perhaps you should get some honest feedback from them on how they feel about their job.

Developing a strategy that includes a win/win will be your solution. We all have varying levels of need; some staff are incredibly low maintenance while others will be the 'needy child' and require more support and coaching.

#### **Tips for the needy:**

1. Don't avoid the situation, approach the needy with some positive communication; not gushing but positive e.g., "*Your project looks to be on track; I am very happy with the results so far, **well done**;; lets talk again when it is near completion but in the mean time, I trust your judgement*". This is called the sandwich method of feedback.

The sandwich is to provide a positive comment followed by reality whilst finishing off with another positive comment. This is advisable when giving feedback to anyone.

E.G. "*This report is very thorough and well researched (positive comment) however I am not sure that the Board will need so much detail, (the reality) It will be valuable*

*information to the rest of the staff so lets table this at the next meeting.*"(Positive comment)

2. Now let's look at the open or closed door issue within your workplace. An open door policy is very popular among modern managers however I believe that doors need to be both open and closed. Sometimes doors need to be closed for hours or even days due to the heavy work loads and other times it can be left open for staff to pop their head in. Managers who *only* subscribe to the open door policy always seem to be behind in their work. Manager who *only* subscribe to the closed door policy appear aloof and unable to engage. It is vital to build up a rapport with your staff but it needs to be integrated with your other core responsibilities.
3. Make sure your reassurance doesn't turn into pandering to their neediness. This can be just as damaging as doing nothing. You cannot sacrifice all of your time on one employee however you will need to offer more support to some than others.

## Summary

If experience has taught me anything it's that *high maintenance* is in the eye of the beholder. When two managers or supervisors have experience with the same group of people, it is very common for each to consider a different person to be high maintenance or one to have problems with someone where the other doesn't. Of course some staff leaves us in no doubt and are disruptive to all but for the most part we all relate differently to each situation. Acknowledging how our own background, values and behaviour impacts on others is a good first step towards understanding other people's behaviour.

We have not assumed that all managers have developed strong people skills themselves. Like all skills, some of you have already learnt a great deal about human behaviour and many of you haven't. If you think you lack the right skills to manage others then you may wish to use the following year to focus on professional development for yourself so as 2010 will bring some solutions into your working life.

Which ever is your circumstance, dysfunctional teams need to be dealt with swiftly in order to focus on the purpose of your existence within that organisation. The good news is with the right approach, improvements can be made within a few months or even weeks.