

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde?

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Martin Vantacki, executive vice president of international operations, is personable and loyal to a fault. He's a guy that will defend you and stick by you through thick and thin. Martin's friends speak highly of him and can easily cite times when he has counseled them and helped them through some of life's most difficult challenges. Yet, at the same time, many other people will say that he is vindictive and out to silence anyone who opposes him. This group of people can quote instances when Martin has seemingly turned on people who objected to his views.

How is it that people can have such polar opposite views of the same person? Is it a case of Jekyll and Hyde personality? Is Martin a loyal, honest, trustworthy leader or is he a vindictive tyrant? The truth is Martin, and leaders like him, are fully both people. If you support Martin and agree with his perspectives, then he subconsciously labels you a friend. But if you disagree with Martin, in a way that he finds threatening, then he subconsciously labels you a foe, and he will proactively attempt to move you out of his world. The problem is that normal, spirited disagreement often feels threatening to Martin, triggering a defense mechanism that is very unproductive. The result is that the unsuspecting person who voiced a different opinion finds him/herself on the outside looking in.

Why are there so many Martin Vantacki's in the world, and what makes them act this way? This behavior generally, but not always, stems from an unhealthy need to be respected and in control. In a nutshell, the Martin's of the world are insecure and easily feel threatened. You could spend a lifetime studying all of the genetic and environmental reasons that cause people to be this way. The point is that nothing will change until these individuals understand that their faulty perceptions are the problem. In other words, "it's them, not the rest of the world." Interestingly, this unproductive behavior is rarely triggered with superiors or people that Martin believes have power over him. During these interactions, Martin says and does all the right things, contributing even more to the Jekyll and

Hyde split perspective. The victims are almost always subordinates or individuals from outside the organization that Martin perceives as threatening.

For example, one year ago during a meeting with 30 of his staff members, Martin asked for input regarding a new product launch planned for the Asia Pacific Region. Of course, the veteran staff members had learned to either agree with Martin's ideas or to offer somewhat innocuous advice in an agreeable fashion. Unfortunately, Jennifer, a sharp new marketing professional came from a job where she was used to speaking up and offering her opinions. So Jennifer announced that she wanted to play 'devil's advocate' and offer some challenging thoughts about why they may want to consider a new direction – a joint launch between Asia Pacific and the European Union. She was smart, articulate and made strong statements as she rattled off five relevant data points to support her argument.

A secure, balanced leader might have responded with, "Jennifer, you make some valid points. I don't agree with everything you're saying but your point about being first to market is a really good one. Let's talk more about that." And then Jennifer would have a gold-star for the day, feeling tremendously valued and ready to contribute in the next meeting. But not Martin. Martin barely heard what Jennifer said and took her challenge as disrespect. He subconsciously labeled Jennifer a foe and proceeded to find only fault with her. No, he never actually told himself that he was going to be vindictive and remove Jennifer from his staff – that would not be in keeping with his moral self-image. Instead, he slipped a negative 'Jennifer filter' over his brain and started assembling examples of her poor work performance and rationale for why she is a detriment to the company. Within a week he had convinced himself that she just wasn't right for where they needed to go. This example might seem unbelievable but it is happening everyday in organizations, sometimes for decades, with the same leader picking off the best and brightest rising stars.

The most surprising thing about people like Martin is that they are often completely unaware that any of this

is happening. They have perfected their ability to actually disassociate themselves with their dark side. Through complex rationalizations, they have developed an uncanny ability to go through life only seeing their loyal, bright side and recalling good data and strong arguments to support the removal of threatening people.

My advice to people that work for a Martin Vantacki is to either find another job or find a way to achieve a favorable label. Both choices may be distasteful but you must know that there is little chance that you will change Martin's behavior. My advice for an organization employing a Martin Vantacki is to make a decision regarding the ROI for his or her total performance. Some companies will tolerate this type of personality because of his or her overall strong client relationships, decision making ability and strategic focus. Clearly there is a price to pay if he stays. And finally, my advice for all of the Martin Vantacki's out there is to control your behavior through awareness. Notice that I did not say change your behavior. Behavior change is much more unlikely than controlling the behavior that is non-productive. When this happens, you will still feel threatened from time to time, but you will see these threats as irrational, lessening their effect.

The goal is that—at some point—a brash, well-meaning subordinate will be able to object to Martin Vantacki's perspective, with Martin honestly hearing the message instead of feeling a threat. In fact, that would be a good goal for any of us.

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