Industrial and Organizational Psychology, **2** (2009), 434–436.
Copyright © 2009 Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology. 1754-9426/09

Using Dark Side Personality Traits to Identify Potential Failure

DEV K. DALAL AND KEVIN P. NOLAN
Bowling Green State University

Silzer and Church (2009) synthesize the literature on high potential, provide a model highlighting its key components, and offer three stages for identifying potential. Within this framework, potential is used to refer to an employee's capacity to develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to succeed in advanced positions within the organization. Identifying someone who has the capacity to advance, however, does not ensure that he/she will do so; careers often derail before potential can be realized. An estimated 50–75% of managers derail before ever reaching their full potential (Burke, 2006; Hogan, 1994; Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994; Hogan & Hogan, 2001). Character attributes including arrogance, mischievousness, and rigidity (Burke; Hogan & Hogan) have been shown to relate to career derailment. Such tendencies, however, often coexist with traditional indices of success (Burke; Denton & van Lill, 2006; Hogan et al.; Hogan & Kaiser, 2005). Achieving employee potential, therefore, appears contingent not only on the presence of positive attributes relating to performance, but also on the absence of negative attributes indicative of derailment (Hogan; Hogan et al.). In this commentary, we present a case for the inclusion of derailing tendencies into Silzer and Church's model and offer dark side personality traits as a prospective avenue for assessment.

Derailment occurs when an employee is identified as having more potential than is realized, and career expectations are higher than achievement (Denton & van Lill, 2006; Gentry & Shanock, 2008). In the focal article, Silzer and Church provide a case example where failure to recognize derailing tendencies results in a misidentification of potential with detrimental organizational consequences (p. 384). Additionally, they suggest that promotion systems based on performance are problematic because they fail to identify derailers (p. 389). Despite recognizing the role derailers play in identifying potential, the authors do not specifically include them in their model. We suggest that the inclusion of derailers, such as dark side personality traits, could improve the presented model.

Dark side personality traits are socially undesirable attributes that have been shown to predict career derailment across a variety of organizations, levels, and positions (Burke, 2006; Hogan & Kaiser, 2005; Judge & LePine, 2007). Research on personality disorders has stressed the importance of recognizing that dysfunctional interpersonal dispositions (e.g., dark side personality traits) coexist with functional interpersonal dispositions including talent, ambition, and good social skills (Burke; Denton & van Lill, 2006; Hogan & Hogan,

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dev K. Dalal.
E-mail: ddalal@bgsu.edu
Address: Department of Psychology, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH 43403
Dev K. Dalal and Kevin P. Nolan, Bowling Green State University.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2009.01169.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

2001). Traditional forms of assessing potential (e.g., interviews, assessment centers, and traditional personality measures) tend to focus exclusively on positive attributes, overlooking one's potential dark side traits. We believe the high rate of managerial failure underscores the importance of acknowledging derailing characteristics, such as dark side traits, when identifying potential.

The assessment of derailing tendencies is not a novel practice but rather one that has been incorporated into several historically noteworthy programs for identifying potential. For example, the approach used by Sears to identify executive talent was concerned with recognizing low tolerance toward different people and ideas (Bentz, 1967). Likewise, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) assessed personality traits indicative of failure including ''disturbing prejudices'' and ''annoying traits'' (OSS Staff, 1948/2006, p. 30). These programs were based on rigorous research methodology representing some best practices for assessing potential. Those interested in the identification of employee potential could benefit from reviewing such historical approaches and incorporating, as they did, indicators of derailment.

Research on dark side personality traits suggests that they are stable, consistent, and difficult to change (Hogan & Hogan, 2001). As such, they could be used to predict the likelihood of success or derailment at any point in one's career. These properties of dark side personality traits are directly in line with how Silzer and Church describe the foundational dimensions of their model. Therefore, we suggest that the foundational dimensions section of Silzer and Church's model be expanded to specifically include dark side personality traits.

Some researchers have criticized the use of personality measures in high-stakes settings for a multitude of reasons including concerns over the possibility of faking (see Morgeson et al., 2007). We present some emerging alternative methods for assessing derailers for those who are reluctant to use self-report personality measures. First, behavioral tendencies relating to dark side personality traits (e.g., blowing up, showing off, and conforming under pressure) are almost always apparent to subordinates (Hogan & Hogan, 2001; Hogan & Kaiser, 2005). As a result, subordinate ratings of dark side personality traits have been shown to be valid predictors of derailment (Hogan, 1994; Hogan & Kaiser). Use of subordinate ratings is one method to avoid the faking concerns surrounding the use of self-report personality assessments in high-stakes testing. Even more intriguing, research suggests that aggregated personality ratings provided by knowledgeable others can be more predictive of overt patterns of behavior than self-ratings (Kolar, Funder, & Colvin, 1996; Wagerman & Funder, 2006). Second, a growing body of research has emerged surrounding the use of behavioral-based approaches and measures for assessing one's potential to derail and/or actual behaviors related to derailing (Gentry & Shanock, 2008; McCauley & Lombardo, 1990). These methods for assessing derailers provide an alternative to personality traits in general by looking at overt, behavioral signs related to derailing as assessed by knowledgeable others.

In this commentary, we suggest that the addition of dark side personality traits to Silzer and Church's model could improve the identification of high potential employees. Given the high costs associated with misidentifying potential, it is prudent to begin assessing personality traits indicative of success *and* derailment. Similar to how engineers seek out the markers and conditions in which their widgets work *and* fail, those who seek to identify employee potential should consider the markers for when potential is likely *and* unlikely to be reached.

References

Bentz V. J. (1967). The Sears experience in the investigation, description, and prediction of executive behavior. In F. R. Wickert & D. E. McFarland (Eds.), *Measuring executive effectiveness* (pp. 147–205). New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2009.01169.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Burke, R. J. (2006). Why leaders fail: Exploring the darkside. *International Journal of Manpower*, *27*, 91–100.

Denton, J. M., & van Lill, J. B. (2006). Managerial derailment. *Vilakshan: The XIMB Journal of Management*, *3*, 231–250.

Gentry, W. A., & Shanock, L. R. (2008). Views of managerial derailment from above and below: The importance of a good relationship with upper management and putting people at ease. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *38*, 2469–2494.

Hogan, R. (1994). Trouble at the top: Causes and consequences of managerial incompetence. *Consulting Psychology Journal*, *46*, 1061–1087.

Hogan, R., Curphy, G. J., & Hogan, J. (1994). What we know about leadership: Effectiveness and personality. *American Psychologist*, *49*, 493–504.

Hogan, R., & Hogan, J. (2001). Assessing leadership: A view from the dark side. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, *9*, 40–51.

Hogan, R., & Kaiser, R. B. (2005). What we know about leadership. *Review of General Psychology*, *9*, 169–180.

Judge, T. A., & LePine, J. A. (2007). The bright and dark sides of personality: Implications for personnel selection in individual and team contexts. In J. Langan-Fox, C. L. Cooper, & R. J. Klimoski (Eds.), *Research companion to the dysfunctional workplace: Management challenges and symptoms*. Northampton, MA: Edgar Elgar.

Kolar, D. W., Funder, D. C., & Colvin, C. R. (1996). Comparing the accuracy of personality judgments by the self and knowledgeable others. *Journal of Personality*, *62*, 311–337.

McCauley, C. D., & Lombardo, M. M. (1990). BENCHMARKS: An instrument for diagnosing managerial strengths and weaknesses. In K. E. Clark & M. B. Clark (Eds.), *Measures of leadership*. West Orange, NJ: Leadership Library of America.

Moregesn, F. P., Campion, M. A., Dipboye, R. L., Hollenbeck, J. R., Murphy, K., & Schmitt, N. (2007). Reconsidering the use of personality tests in personnel selection contexts. *Personnel Psychology*, *60*, 638–729.

Silzer, R., & Church, A. H. (2009). The pearls and perils of identifying potential. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, *2*, 377–412.

The OSS Assessment Staff (1948/2006). *Assessment of men: Selection of personnel from The Office of Strategic Services* [Reprinted in 2006]. St. Petersburg, FL: Hailer.

Wagerman, S. A., & Funder, D. C. (2006). Acquaintance reports of personality and academic achievement: A case for conscientiousness. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *41*, 221–229.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2009.01169.x Published online by Cambridge University Press