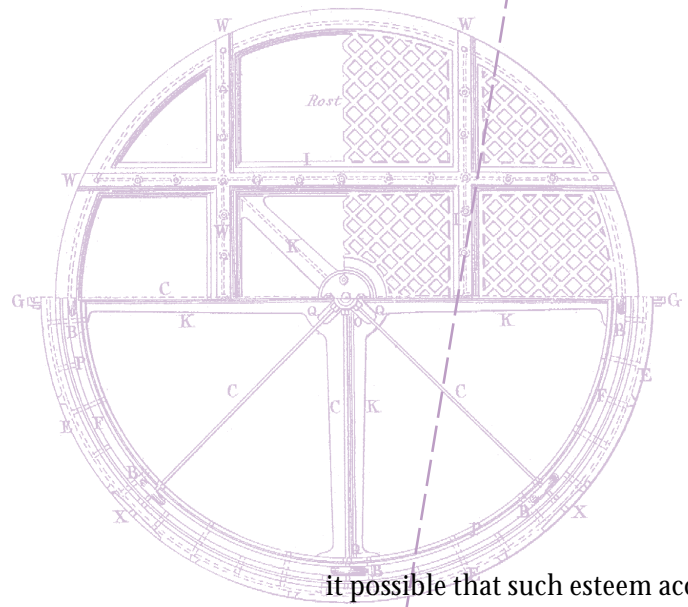


poisonous passivity

Francie Dalton



After Janet, a senior executive, had grumbled bitterly and at length about the inaccessibility and coldness of her CEO toward staff, business consultant Laura asked Janet if she had ever presented the boss with options for how he might better manage his image. For example, Laura inquired, had Janet developed a staff rotation matrix for monthly breakfasts/lunches with him; monthly or quarterly meetings with each department; etc. “No”, said Janet; “I would never suggest such a thing to him.”

“So”, asked Laura, “you’re observing that he has an image/behavior issue, you acknowledge that you and others are aggravated by it, you know of steps he could take to improve, and yet you’ve not communicated these to him. Why is that?”

“Well!” Janet huffed. “He knows what he’s like. He knows how he comes off. If he cared, he wouldn’t behave that way. I’m certainly not going to discuss his behavior with him!”

“Do you know for sure that he is aware of how he is perceived?” asked Laura.

Silence.

“Without confronting him about his current behavior, could you offer suggestions on how he might engage with staff?” Laura asked; “Or might you suggest a cultural survey to capture persuasive data?”

“I don’t have the authority”, said Janet, “to make suggestions.”

“You have to have authority to make suggestions?” Laura asked, incredulous.

“Around here you do!” Janet replied.

“Have you ever made a suggestion to him before?” Laura asked.

“Yes. I suggested 3 ideas for our holiday party and he rejected all of them” responded Janet.

“I see,” said Laura. “So you’re thinking that because he didn’t accept those particular suggestions, he won’t accept any suggestions on anything?”

“Well...yeah!” replied Janet. “And even if that’s not so, it’s not my job to manage his image.”

“You’ve expressed frustration several times that you’re not included in strategic planning, and that your role doesn’t get the esteem shown to other high level professionals” observed Laura. “Is

it possible that such esteem accrues only to those who step up and demonstrate a willingness to do the hard things?”

“Yeah – OK,” said Janet. “Look - I have to hang up now.”

Embedded in this brief conversation are no less than 5 aspects of poisonous passivity that can derail individual success, subvert group effectiveness, and exacerbate undesirable turnover.

Poison #1: Assumption of Ill Intent

You offended someone and didn’t even realize it.

Your most recent decision was in direct opposition to a previous decision about which you had completely forgotten.

You completed a negotiation with a third party without knowing that it would have an adverse affect on another department.

Most of us are willing to concede that we may have blind spots regarding our own behavior.

When we're surprised to learn how others see us, we expect forgiveness to immediately follow our statement of "no intent". We aren't so quick, however, to view the behavior of others as benign. Instead, we assume others are fully aware of their impacts, and that their behaviors are deliberate.

Poison #2: Faulty Logic

Because you made a mistake with assignment "A", you should never again be given assignment "A".

Because you had one really bad day, it's appropriate for you to ever after carry the label of "difficult employee".

Because you didn't realize a particular VIP was sensitive about a specific issue, you clearly have zero interpersonal skills.

If you'd rail at these, why apply such faulty logic to others?

It's absurd to believe that because the boss approves one suggestion, s/he will approve all suggestions. It is equally absurd to believe that because the boss disapproves one suggestion, s/he will disapprove all suggestions.

Poison #3: Negative Fantasies

Even when we have absolutely no personal history at all with an individual, we can be amazingly resolute in our predictions about what they would do if...

It doesn't require more than a question or two to reveal that such predictions are based on gossip or innuendo, and lack any specific experiential grounding.

However, as tools to justify inaction or to mask an unwillingness to take initiative, negative fantasies are almost unbeatable. In the hands of spin-masters, negative fantasies can masquerade compellingly as valid reasons to do nothing, when in fact they're just excuses for doing nothing.

Poison #4: Blame Orientation

It's so much easier to blame others for something that did or didn't happen than to take constructive action ourselves.

Lots of willing listeners will be attracted to conversations about what's wrong. And there's lots of empathy for those who make a convincing case for having been victimized. Solution oriented conversations, though, attract fewer listeners, in part because they usually require us to take on new or different work.

The soothing balm of blaming others numbs innovative thinking, and desensitizes us to the need for initiating change.

Poison #5: Abdication of Personal Responsibility


Although more egregious at the senior levels, deliberate

disengagement is the essence of shared culpability, and isn't justified at any hierarchical level.

Whether due to an oblivious lack of introspection or the intentional avoidance of accountability, abdication is an active choice – not a passive one. Disavowing personal responsibility for helping to craft or implement solutions makes one, at best, part of the problem, and at worst, irrelevant.

Attempting to mitigate detachment by citing "low level status" or claiming "it's not my job" may indeed insulate us and confer impunity, but it can also erode the assignment of high potential status.

Even if only one of these poisons has been dispersed in your organization, it's sufficient to permeate your culture with the suboptimal performance of an "us vs. them" mentality.

Whether you need a preventive vaccine or a curative antidote, the medicine is the same: dispense this article so that it's easy for everyone to recognize poisonous passivity as the menacing hazard that it is. Infuse your culture with the message that those who aren't willing to act have lost their right to complain. 

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