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UNDERSTANDING PROBLEM EMPLOYEES

By John Foppe

The flashing blue and red lights of a police cruiser captured employees' attention on Monday morning. The office had been broken into over the weekend. A laptop, client database and other files of sensitive information were missing. No locks were broken. Instead, the evidence indicated an inside job and pointed to the sales manager who was fired the previous Friday.

"He was with us for over ten years - I can't believe he would be so spiteful," the CEO lamented. When asked why the sales manager was let go, the CEO said, "He often butted in on matters outside his department. Then we found him padding his team's numbers, which really angered the other managers. He was also critical and controlling - even domineering. I warned him a couple of times that his behavior was out of line. On top of that, he didn't get along with our new VP of operations, and that was the final straw."

Based on the CEO's story, it's clear the terminated employee was an instigator of trouble. When these types of situations arise, people involved often wonder, "How did things get so bad, and how can we undo the damage and keep the same thing from happening again?"

PROFILES OF EXASPERATION

For many reasons - longer workdays, poor healthcare benefits, abrupt layoffs and exorbitant executive pay - many workers are exasperated. They are infuriated, frustrated and wound up, and often believe they just can't win. When one's sense of self-efficacy is shaken, all sorts of distrustful thoughts and feelings fester. Fear

turns into anger. People perceive they are victims.

Although extreme, the problem sales manager illustrates the lengths an exasperated employee can go to derail an organization's vision - even sabotaging the company itself - whether or not they mean to. Most employees do not react as desperately as the rogue sales manager in this example; yet, their actions can produce a breakdown between vision and outcome.

People automatically filter messages through their perceptions, and they have emotional reactions to those perceptions, albeit often subconsciously. Over time, reactions change into practices. People carry out those practices with certain intentions and take on specific roles.

Employees unwittingly filter the company's vision through these perceptions, reactions and practices, often encrypting the vision like a code. Consequently, a translation gap between the stated goal and the desired outcome opens like a canyon, blocking organizations from reaching a desired outcome.

As leaders and teams attempt to better translate visions into outcomes, it's important to be aware of four common profiles of exasperation that distort company vision. Identifying the exasperated workers in the organization and knowing how their practices ultimately make or break the company's vision provide a basis for 1) helping employees change and 2) improving company culture. Undoubtedly, everyone has worked with or knows one of these characters:

The Loner - Loners have little to do with either the successes or failures of outcomes. They are known for asking themselves, "How do I get out of this?" Loners

don't have a sense of direction and often may be seen as "deserters." They are convinced of their inability to do anything supportive and frequently feel they don't have what it takes to be successful.

They passively accept problems as they occur and are usually seen as incompetent. They withdraw from what is happening around them and come to work only to "do their job." They say things like "Nobody asked me," or "I wasn't included" or "There is nothing I can do." Ultimately, they detach and thus avoid involvement with problem-solving and decision-making.

The Spectator – Spectators are the "yes" people in the organization. However, most of their "yes" responses are uncommitted because they spend most of their time wondering, "Why should I do this?" On the surface they look like brownnosers. Spectators will agree to do something even though they think it is pointless; however, they don't share their opinion or question why they should do what they have agreed to do. They tend to say "yes" to everyone and everything without actually being committed to following through. They watch what is happening around them from a distance and get only remotely involved. They are preoccupied with "fitting in" and are unlikely to challenge or confront anyone.

Spectators tune in to problems, survey the options and often know what to do, but something stops them from acting. They may come across as disingenuous. Consequently, others rarely take spectators seriously. They tend to stand by and witness the stagnation of outcomes.

The Instigator – Instigators enjoy being disagreeable. They filter everything from a perception that there is something wrong. They are known for asking, "Why is it being done that way?" They can be seen as the "stickler" in the organization and frequently challenge others, seeming to enjoy confrontations. They claim their intentions are from a place of integrity; however, they easily come across as self-righteous and arrogant.

Instigators often recognize the problem and do something about it, but what they do is frequently negative or counterproductive - perhaps even destructive. They tend to be rigid in their views and demonstrate inflexibility as they butt in and point the finger of responsibility at everyone around them. They are commonly heard criticizing and blaming others. They are comfortable pushing the limits. When it comes to following the rules, they are known as rebels. Instigators paint a bleak picture of what is happening around them and are outspoken about the hopelessness they project

The Competitor – Competitors are out to get ahead. They are known for considering themselves first in every situation with a "What's in it for me?" approach. They see everything as a contest, and their main goal is to stand above the crowd, often at someone else's expense. Competitors are driven to reinforce rules even if they are unofficial rules made up on the spot. They

are gung-ho in most settings and ready for action as long as there is a clear path for self-interested gain. They are likely to strive to outperform others and appear overambitious.

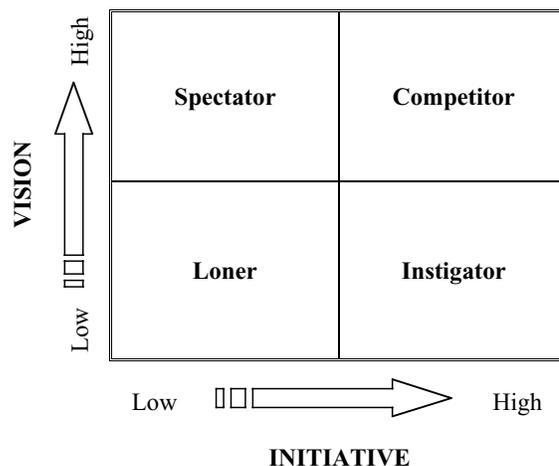
RECOGNIZING THE PLAYERS

How can leaders and managers know whether they're working with a loner, spectator, instigator or competitor? Only a reliable assessment provides a definitive answer; however, there are two fundamental qualities that will help identify types of individuals: vision and initiative. Although these have positive connotations, there are people who have negative vision and initiative too.

An employee's motives and intentions contextualize whether their vision and initiative are good or bad. When employees are exasperated, they can misuse their vision and initiative to stall outcomes and derail strategy. The crooked ex-sales manager, for example, had plenty of negative initiative.

All employees have some vision and initiative. Some people's levels are higher than others. But everyone lives and works on a continuum of growth. When trying to make things happen, subconscious exasperation exists on one end of the spectrum and conscious execution exists on the other end. Everyone has the ability to progress or regress along the continuum. It's just that some people are simply closer than others to one end or the other on the sliding scale.

Successfully executing initiatives involves showing employees a different perspective, coaching them in choosing different reactions and training them in new practices. Loners can become learners. Spectators can become promoters. Instigators can become collaborators. And competitors can become innovators. When such transformations are made, visions can become outcomes.



Born without arms, John Foppe speaks, coaches and trains on how to maintain momentum when executing initiatives, and translate visions into outcomes. He is the CEO of Visionary Velocity Worldwide, based near St. Louis, MO. For further information, visit www.visionaryvelocity.com.