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## Black, White, and Gray
### Coping with the Bivalent Leadership Style

Most who knew her agreed that Joan wasn't the easiest person to deal with. She quickly got on people's nerves. Of course, her behavior wasn't all bad. As one of the senior executives in the company, she had a number of excellent qualities. She was creative, she had a great capacity for work, and she was extremely knowledgeable about the industry. So why, with all that talent, did she need to engage in so much drama? Why was she so rigid in her outlook? Why the angry outbursts, the constant criticism of everything and everyone, the half-truths, rumor spreading, and manipulation? Why did she always force everybody to choose sides? Didn't she realize that—in most situations—there is such a thing as the middle ground? But "compromise" didn't feature in Joan's vocabulary.

Joan had what can be described as a bivalent leadership style. Hers was a world of stark contrasts, where everything was similarly "split." She would only deal with the people she perceived as "good," and lost no time in vilifying those she perceived as "bad." The consequence of this behavior was intense strife wherever she went.

Joan's toxicity permeated the organization and might have continued unchecked had it not been for the shock impact of a 360° feedback report, administered as part of an assessment exercise for the company's executive

body. The report revealed the extent to which Joan's colleagues and direct reports were fed up with her dysfunctional behavior. According to their feedback, the disturbances she was creating in the organization was driving everyone crazy. Her behavior was also highly contagious, and causing problems throughout the organization.

Based on the 360° feedback, Joan's boss laid it on the line. As far as he was concerned, Joan needed to change her behavior or there was no question of her getting the promotion she was expecting. At the same time, recognizing Joan's qualities and contributions to the success of the company, he arranged for her to work with an executive coach to support her change efforts. That's where I came in, as I had previously worked for the CEO of the company.

Initially, I hesitated about taking on the assignment. I knew from past experience that working with executives with a bivalent leadership style like Joan's could be a challenge. They are notoriously resistant to coaching interventions, as they quickly interpret any attempt at behavioral change as an attack. People like Joan can drive their coaches crazy just as much as their colleagues and direct reports.

If coaching was going to be successful, it was vital to build a stable, positive relationship with Joan. However, her three failed marriages didn't inspire confidence in her relationship-building skills. It was clear that Joan's way of splitting the world into good and bad had also led to a great deal of misery in her personal life. It was my awareness of this that persuaded me to take on her case.

The tactic of splitting people into enemies and friends is as old as human nature. Human beings have always been tempted to define the cosmos as a struggle between the good world of light, and the evil world of darkness. This sort of splitting extends into the everyday world. Everywhere we go, we thrive on black-and-white narratives such as good versus bad, negative versus positive, hero versus villain, friend versus enemy, believers versus unbelievers, love versus hate, life versus death, fantasy versus reality, and so on. Religions are more than ready to split the world into believers and non-believers, Christians against Jews, Muslims against Christians; similarly politicians' simplistic soundbites create the stark contrasting camps of Republican versus Democrat, Tory versus Labour.

Like most behavioral patterns, splitting originates in childhood and the way parents deal with their children. The tendency to split is related to insecure or disrupted attachment behavior patterns—bearing in mind that attachment behavior is the template of all human relationships. Learning how to be effective in interpersonal relationships is a journey that starts early in life and depends very much on the quality of the original child–caregiver relationship—how the caregiver interacts with the child. When the child reaches the developmental milestone of tolerating ambiguity, the foundation for emotional and social intelligence is established. However, if the child is exposed to too much strife and discord early in life, fuzzy, unstable boundaries can be created, making it more likely that the developing child will engage in splitting and categorize people and situations as either all good or all bad.

Splitting, or all-or-nothing thinking, is the failure to integrate the positive and negative qualities of the self and others. It means the inability to reconcile contradictory attitudes and to accept that we can have simultaneous positive and negative feelings about someone or something. And although splitting is a fairly common defense mechanism, for some people, particularly those with developmental issues, it becomes *the* defense mechanism. This position gives them clarity, of a sort. They are able to make clear distinctions, taking a confusing mass of experience or information and dividing it into categories that become meaningful. But the cognitive distortion brought on by viewing a multifaceted complex world through a binary lens means that we are bound to miss out on essential details.

My immediate challenge in dealing with Joan was how to help her recognize that living in a dichotomous world was self-defeating. She needed to move forward and have a more nuanced view of life. First, Joan had to acknowledge that she had very little understanding of her own inner thoughts, beliefs, desires, and intentions. This in turn made it extremely difficult for her to interpret other people's desires and motives. She needed to become more skilled at reading her own and other people's minds, to see others from the inside and herself from the outside.

Trying to help Joan was like walking on thin ice. I had to be very careful about how I gave feedback, knowing that she reacted very badly to criticism. For a long time Joan kept on splitting: I was good or bad,

depending on whether I met her emotional needs or made her feel frustrated. She was completely unaware of her self-deception, selectively collecting evidence to support her oversimplified black-or-white perception of others. I kept on reminding myself that this was Joan's way of preventing herself being overwhelmed by anxiety. It was her way of protecting her feelings of self-worth. My task was to help her readjust this assessment and make the situations she encountered more reality-based.

Instead of focusing on her relationships at work, I got Joan to think about what was happening between the two of us. By concentrating on what was happening within the coaching relationship, and developing explanatory stories when something happened, she could contrast her perception of herself and her perception of me. The challenge was to increase her psychological sensitivity by exploring alternative interpretations and intentions from both her and my point of view. In fact, Joan needed to learn or relearn a number of things: how to empathize and make other people feel more comfortable; to communicate her thoughts and feelings clearly; and to control her feelings of fear, shame, and anger. It was particularly important for her to realize that her level of anxiety narrowed her focus so that she concentrated only on potential threats. Working together on these themes, however, we created a collaborative coaching relationship, in which both of us had a joint responsibility to understand the mental processes taking place in the here and now, and reflect on what had happened in similar situations before.

Gradually, Joan began to learn how to react to situations more appropriately. She started to pay attention to her mood swings and make an effort to stop and think about what was happening to her before reacting. Her impulse control improved. She came to realize that her bivalent leadership style meant that she was projecting her own fears and insecurities onto others. Slowly but surely, she became ready to accept that we all have flaws, that none of us is either black or white, and to let in the gray.

Outside our coaching sessions, two things were important additional supports for her change effort. First, Joan kept a diary in which she reflected on each day's events. This became an important aid in helping her see things from other people's perspectives. Recording her thoughts helped her become more effective at replacing negative self-defeating thoughts with more realistic ones. Second, Joan met someone and began

a new relationship that had a stabilizing influence on her behavior. I was very encouraged by her ability to maintain this relationship and simultaneously make the effort to re-establish a number of old friendships. These secure relationships became safe testing grounds to help her understand the reasons for her previous disruptive behavior patterns and to adopt new, more productive ways of dealing with others.

Although the change was very gradual, Joan ultimately found a more effective way of living. After a year of coaching, I could confidently say that she was doing quite well and her progress was marked when she got the promotion her boss had ruled out 12 months earlier.

## Questions

- How flexible do you think your thought processes are?
- Do you have a tendency to simplify the world by putting people into boxes, to classify them as "bozos" or insanely great?
- Is your leadership style characterized by black and white or all-or-nothing thinking?
- Do you find it hard to accept that the world exists of shades of gray? Are you willing to recognize that people can be both good and bad?
- Do you understand why you perceive the world in such stark colours? Do you have a sense of where this perception comes from?
- Are you the kind of person that believes that there is only one "right" way of doing things?
- When you have made up your mind, do you find it difficult to accept other points of view? Is it very hard for you to change your mind?