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Task Focused Achiever or Insensitive Bully

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Sometimes people who behave in a task focused, goal oriented way can find themselves accused of being a bully. This might happen if they are unaware of the effects of their behaviour on others. Equally, sometimes people perceive that they are being bullied when the so-called bully is simply holding them accountable for expected results. Managing this tension requires elegant skill.



My experience is that many people who have been accused of being bullies are left quite stunned; in their minds they are just hard-working people who make sure things get done as needed. In fact, they are often praised and recognized for their 'can do' and 'make it happen' attitudes. Sure, they can be thick skinned and insensitive, but they don't mean any harm. They are dedicated and committed to results. Sometimes they see those people that would accuse them of bullying as being over-sensitive, lacking in conviction and perhaps in need of too much molly coddling.

Task-focused, action-oriented people get their sense of value and significance from taking action and producing results. In their minds they are doing well. They have a tendency to over-use this behaviour at the

expense of others. Often, they have been on the receiving end of similar behaviour during their formative years and part of their coping strategy is to toughen up and not let anyone get the better of them.

These people can lack awareness of what it's like for those on the receiving end of their own behaviour, especially if the other person is not like them. When we don't have a clear perspective of reality, the standard of measure for each of us is: 'if I feel ok, then it's ok', although we may not be aware that even if something might be ok for ourselves, maybe it's not ok for others. Similarly, if we don't feel ok, we feel the need to fix things ourselves, although we may be unaware of (or try to justify) the effects on people who are getting in the way. This is a flawed internal framework, which creates an illusion, because whilst it works for us in the immediate moment ('I feel better'), it fails over time ('people don't want to co-operate with me, so I end up doing everything myself'). This sets up a vicious cycle, in which other people don't have the opportunity to learn for themselves. So we are completely unaware that we have encouraged learned helplessness in others.

So how can we deal with these situations? The task-focused, action-oriented person needs to see the full picture. Analysing their behaviour in detail enables them to see what actually happened and how it made things harder for them over time.

When someone constantly takes over and drives projects through, other people give up and let them do everything – so learned helplessness is created in the others, who then blame the person who took over for creating problems.

These people often struggle to let tasks go because this activates their fear that things won't ever get done and that there might be terrible consequences. It's as though these people have a compulsive drive to act. Once aware of this drive, they can pause and potentially take a more healthy perspective. Then they can make considered choices around where, when and how to act whilst respecting the other people involved. This might mean slowing down to take other people into account and then making some adjustments so things work well for everyone. When people can see that their actions are, in fact, making things harder than they need to be, they are motivated to change their behaviour.

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But how do you still get things done to a high standard, enhance performance, and drive through tough challenges without coming across as a bully?

It's all to do with being insightful, aware of what drives you and **how to manage those drives so you can skilfully find the right balance between task-focus and people-focus** for the situation at hand. You also need to be respectful of what other people need for them to be able to participate and contribute. You have to slow down enough to be aware of other people's skills and abilities. You can set things up to help other people be successful in achieving the desired results.

Ask yourself these questions:

1. Are you sure everyone's clear on the desired outcome? Have you checked?
2. Are you clear about the standards required, the challenge the task represents and what it will take to achieve it?
3. Do other people have enough context to enable them to make decisions or to understand what's important to the task and why?
4. Have you made sure the task makes sense to them?
5. Have you ensured that other people have the required capability or have you incorrectly assumed that?
6. Have you involved others in a way that connects with their motivations?
7. Do you allow people to make mistakes and clean up after themselves so they can learn?
8. Do you give people enough space to do the task themselves with the appropriate amount of responsibility?
9. When things go wrong, do you refocus on the outcome and simply find other ways to achieve it, despite what has happened?

All of this requires that you manage your emotions about what's going on without leaking them out onto others. This is called emotional maturity, which is easy to say but not always easy to do. Hiding emotions doesn't work, as that's when they leak out and create havoc without you being aware of it. Managing your emotions is what is required: seeing the emotion for what it is, clarifying what requires attention and then choosing the right measure of response with your focus on the desired outcome, not on what you are feeling. The difficulty with this is that often a task-focused high achiever is somewhat insensitive to their own emotions, or else discounts their significance. Such people often feel vulnerable when in touch with their own emotions. They can experience them as potentially overwhelming and, hence, disempowering. This relationship with their emotions needs to change for them to be able to develop the emotional maturity required.

Task-focused, action-oriented people are a great asset when they can develop emotional maturity that enables them to find the sweet spot between task-focus and people-focus, to help others achieve great things.



To learn more about emotional maturity and its impact on workplace performance and outcomes, set up a time to have a conversation with Sarah. To get in contact please email her EA, Leanne Imbro on ea@sarahcornally.com or call 02 9801 0659.

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