



Self-Defeating Behaviors that Kill Good Work  
*The Leadership Bermuda Triangle*

By Dan Harrison Ph.D.

Effective managers master the competency of balancing “task” and “relationship” in managing the performance of others.

## Beware: The Bermuda Triangle is Highly Dangerous!

Effective leaders drive organizational performance. Factors that interfere with high levels of performance need to be identified and dealt with early and often. The key factors that threaten high performance cultures are managerial permissiveness, lack of clarity, and poor communication skills. Weak management threatens a high performance culture and can kill good work. This article explores the factors that can lead to the perfect storm, or “Bermuda Triangle”, so that you can take action to mitigate this risk in your own organization.

## Managing Others’ Performance is Uncomfortable for Many

Anyone who supervises, manages, provides direction or otherwise works closely with others and is responsible for reviewing and/or correcting their work performance feels a special kind of pressure and bears a heavy load of responsibility. Even many well-intentioned managers are often uncomfortable carrying out this part of the job. While they may be technically competent, the ugly truth is that many managers do a poor job of managing others’ performance. Certainly there are many reasons why, including:

- Wanting to be liked by others (rather than respected)
- Wanting to be seen as a supportive coach, not as the “heavy”, or enforcer
- Conflict-averse / procrastinates – maybe the problem will go away if I just ignore it ...?
- Lacking the communication skills that will help others, rather than just damage or traumatize them
- Seeing themselves on the same level as those we supervise and viewing “management control” as a negative, or coercive tactic
- Lack of clear expectations – employees don’t really understand what the expectations, goals and standards are and so they under-perform, often without even realizing it

## Jekyll and Hyde

And then there are those at the other end of the performance-management spectrum who actually enjoy the power that comes with the performance management role. Willing and ready to enforce and correct, they often lack the warmth and personal connection needed to make enforcement of standards a positive growth experience by employees. These managers are often seen as harsh, insensitive and/or cold. They don’t build the loyalty and respect of their people because they are seen as uncaring, authoritative, or on a power-trip. Effective managers master the competency of balancing “task” and “relationship” in managing the performance of others.

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In addition to under-performance and productivity lags, lack of employee accountability can easily lead to a “dependency culture” in which employees don't feel empowered to take action unless specifically directed to do so by someone higher-up in the organization. When managers don't clearly articulate performance expectations explicitly and frequently, employees often wait to be specifically directed to do something. When employees wait to be directed or count on their manager to solve problems, rather than take action based upon their own initiative, an unhealthy culture of dependency is created.

### What to do?

If a dependency culture exists even in part of the organization, what can we do to fix it? Given that Performance Management is so important, how can we help managers change course to more effectively drive business results and become proactive versus reactive?

### Effective Performance Management Requires Paradoxical Leadership Skills

In today's complex and fast-paced marketplace, managers are increasingly being asked to exercise skills that seemingly contradict one another. For example, managers are told to coach their people (i.e. listen more, encourage, don't tell them what to do), but also manage their performance closely (i.e. hold them accountable, correct them quickly and often, apply metrics). Coaching requires strong interpersonal and communication skills while performance management calls upon harder, more analytical skills in addition to courage, frankness and clarity. What is a manager to do when competing demands make the job harder and harder to do well?

Dave Jensen, in his book *The Executive's Paradox*, says: “Many of the goals/demands/challenges executives face in our dynamic, hypercompetitive, rapidly changing workplaces are paradoxes – they pull in opposite directions simultaneously.” That is, the role of the manager is increasingly that of managing paradox effectively. Control costs AND grow the business; meet short-term objectives AND innovate for long-term growth; take risks AND protect the organization. Performance management is no different in that it calls upon a paradoxical skill-set to do it well.

### Performance Management Paradoxes

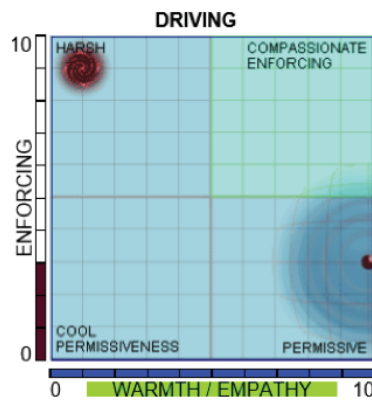
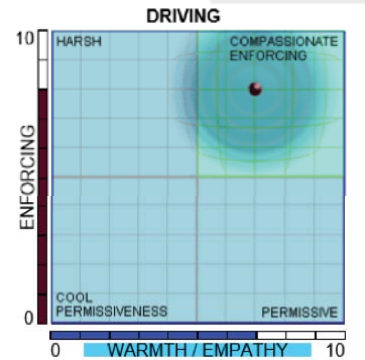
If we accept that well-developed performance management skills represent successfully integrating paradoxical management behaviors, then what specific traits are involved in this relationship? Dr. Dan Harrison, creator of the Harrison Assessment, identifies:

- Warmth/Empathy — The tendency to express positive feelings and affinity toward others
- Enforcing — The tendency to insist upon necessary rules being followed

Paradox theory holds that when a set of paradoxical traits are significantly out-of-balance, stress and pressure will build up over time and the person will likely act out as a way to release this pressure and behave in ways that are usually entirely unlike him or her.

That is, an individual who excels as a performance manager exhibits high warmth and empathy toward his/her people AS WELL AS the tendency to insist upon necessary rules being followed, standards upheld, and targets met. This relationship represents a paradox – care for your people AND hold them accountable. When both traits are high, the manager excels at this “tough love” approach – “Because I care about you, your development and your future, I must correct you/tell you/ even discipline you (in more severe cases) because you are not performing as needed/expected.” Harrison calls this successful integration of warmth/empathy and enforcing, Compassionate Enforcing, and the paradox itself is called Driving (i.e. Driving Results Through Others’ Accountability).

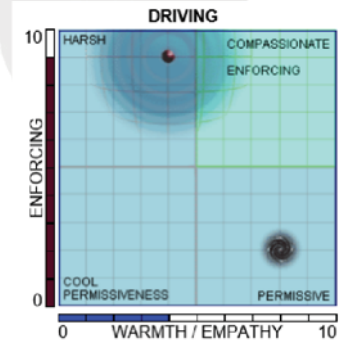
The chart (right) shows the relationship between scores on the two traits and the four quadrants that result from different combinations of scores. This individual scored 7 on a possible 10-point scale in Warmth/Empathy and 8 on Enforcing, which is plotted with the black circle; the radiating shading surrounding the dot shows the range of behavior that results from the relationship between the two traits. This person has a slightly higher score in Enforcing than in Warmth/Empathy, but the graph shows that he/she is most likely very effective at performance management, applying either or both when required.



Now let’s look at some other combinations. The chart at the left shows an individual’s scores that are quite different than the one above. This person has a score of 10 on Warmth/Empathy, and a score of 3 on Enforcing. The plotted intersection of these paradoxical traits is the Permissive range. This person has the virtue of being very compassionate, which is wonderful for many roles. However, as a manager who must hold people accountable when they under-perform, this person is likely to shy away from enforcement. This person may, in fact, fail to hold people accountable on a day-to-day basis.

The secondary symbol in the top left quadrant (looks like a storm, or hurricane, purposefully) represents this person’s likely behavior under stress. Paradox theory holds that when a set of paradoxical traits are significantly out-of-balance, stress and pressure will build up over time and the person will likely act out as a way to release this pressure and behave in ways that are usually entirely unlike him or her. In this case, this person may have gotten to the point of feeling taken advantage of due to his/her good nature and reached his/her breaking point. The term, Harsh, in this case, describes how he or she might be perceived by others when that pressure is finally released, often verbally, in very clear terms!

Conversely, consider the graph to the right, in which this individual has a quite different combination: High Enforcing and low Warmth/Empathy. This person is quite likely to enforce but does so in a brusque, harsh, uncaring way as a primary style. When this person is under stress, his/her behavior flips to the Permissive quadrant. That is, he/she will withdraw, or go passive; he/she may just walk away from conflict or go “underground”. This profile is sub-optimal because warmth and empathy towards direct reports is crucial to building strong relationships, trust and loyalty. This person needs to come to terms with this imbalance, recognize the barriers that exist, and make some changes to become a more effective manager.

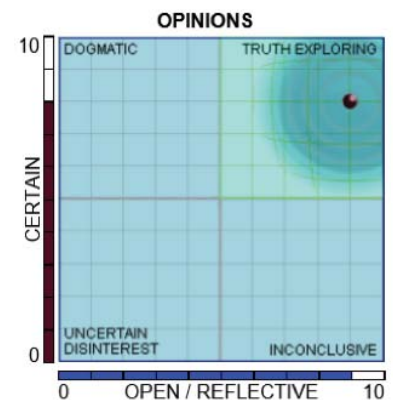


### Good Performance Management is Driven by Additional Paradoxes

Driving others’ accountability is a good place to start the discussion, but other paradoxes are involved with effective performance management, too. Consider the paradox of Opinions which is composed of these traits:

- Open/Reflective — The tendency to reflect on many different viewpoints
- Certain — The tendency to feel confident in one’s opinions

Open/Reflective can be thought of as open-mindedness; employees value managers who are open-minded, will listen and reflect on their ideas, take their opinions seriously, and even be willing to change their mind if presented with a better idea. Self-certainty is just as important, however. Employees look to their manager to have strong opinions, beliefs, and values. They want to know what their leader stands for, what they won’t compromise on, and what their performance expectations are. A strong leader continually voices his/her vision of the future as well as the specific performance expectations for each person who reports to him/her. The paradox here is the balance that exists between being open-minded and being clear. Strong, balanced scores on both traits results in a Truth Explorer profile.



A Compassionate Enforcer who is also a Truth Explorer has a leg-up as a performance manager because he/she is likely to be respected as a leader who makes expectations/standards CLEAR as well as HOLDS PEOPLE ACCOUNTABLE when they under-perform. This behavior is good for morale, as well, because other employees see that performance is being dealt with fairly and with care – resulting in motivation and engagement.

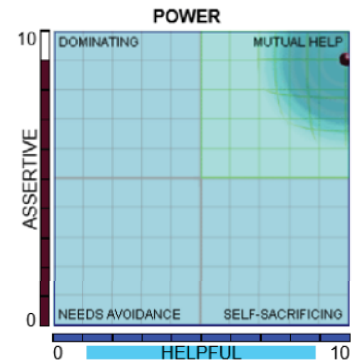
A strong leader continually voices his/her vision of the future as well as the specific performance expectations for each person who reports to him/her.

When managers are “out of balance” they exhibit self-defeating behaviors that undermine their efforts and create poorly performing teams.

Another paradox that has implications for effective performance management is Power (i.e. answers the question: How does one use one’s personal power?). The traits that represent the paradox are:

- Assertive — The tendency to put forward personal wants and needs
- Helpful — The tendency to respond to others’ needs and assist or support others to achieve their goals

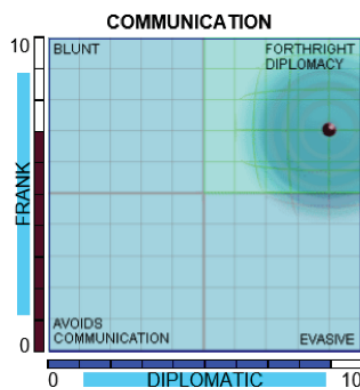
In this paradox, an individual’s tendency to be helpful to others is juxtaposed with assertiveness. A high/high result (shown right) is described as Mutual Help; that is, the person is motivated to BOTH help others achieve their goals/have their needs met AS WELL AS get their own needs met, often by asking for help or leveraging strong relationships. Far too often, managers end up in the Self-Sacrificing quadrant, when they are overly-focused on “helping” (think dependency culture again!) their people, rather than empowering them to help themselves. Assertive does not necessarily mean selfish and self-serving. Assertive managers are not caught in the trap of getting too involved with the day-to-day. They trust and coach their people to do more for themselves.



Finally, we need to consider the Communication paradox. The traits related to this paradox are:

- Diplomatic — The tendency to state things in a tactful manner
- Frank — The tendency to be straightforward, direct, to the point, and forthright

A strong manager must exhibit strong communication skills. He/she must be able to be diplomatic, tactful and sensitive to others AS WELL AS frank, direct, to-the-point, and clear when the skill is more appropriate.



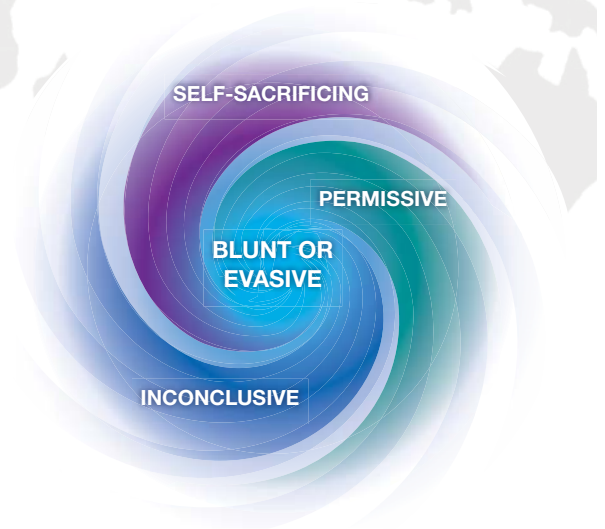
In this case (shown left), this manager has strong and balanced communication skills (Forthright Diplomacy). Consider the implications of Evasiveness if the manager had a strong preference for diplomatic communication and was very reluctant to communicate frankly about employee accountability. How would he/she express performance expectations clearly and concisely in a way that the employee had no doubts about? Conversely, a blunt communication style could be equally off-putting for some employees. A good manager can flex his/her style depending upon what is most needed at any given time.

Out-of-balance communication behaviors are the drivers of the “Bermuda Triangle”. When managers are “out of balance” they exhibit self-defeating behaviors that undermine their efforts and create poorly performing teams.

## The Bermuda Triangle

Now that we've identified several factors that undermine any leader's ability to hold others accountable and manage their performance well, consider how the Bermuda Triangle of leadership can form:

- Low Enforcing, High Warmth/Empathy – employee experiences permissiveness (not holding people accountable despite friendliness and caring team atmosphere – permissive behavior).
- Low Certain, High Open/Reflective – employee is unsure of the manager's specific work expectations, despite experiencing the benefits of an open-minded leader who is always willing to listen – inconclusive behavior.
- Low Assertive, High Helpful – employee is "taken care of" by the manager and witnesses the manager subjugating his/her own needs and goals because the focus is on helping, doing the work him/herself, rather than empowering, training and developing others – self-sacrificing behavior.
- Low Frank, High Diplomatic – employee experiences evasiveness rather than "straight-talk" when it comes to accountability; lack of clarity and focus on critical objectives – evasive behavior.



A Handbook of Work and Organizational Psychology:  
Volume 4: Organizational Psychology (Handbook of Work & Organizational Psychology) 2 Sub Edition by Charles De Wolff (Editor), P J D Drenth (Editor), THIERRY HENK (Editor)

The Executives Paradox:  
How to Stretch When You're Pulled by Opposing Demands,  
by David G. Jenson, World Business Publishing

If all of these (or even 2-3) of these conditions exist, managers may be headed for the Bermuda Triangle of leadership. Managers are often unaware of their own Achilles' Heels – think of these as blind spots or derailers. Correcting this kind of behavior takes self-awareness first, then contemplation, acceptance, and only then, action and behavioral change. It is possible for any of us to learn new skills and grow into competent leaders, but only if we first learn, accept and proactively address uncomfortable truths.