

## **The Devil Wears Prada: The Toxic Executive Le chef vénéneux**

Some of the most beautiful mushrooms are the most poisonous. Similar to some talented executives, who have brilliant results and are rocketing to the top of their companies, they infect anyone obstructing their path. A perfect example of a toxic executive is Miranda Priestly, Meryl's Streep's character in "The Devil Wears Prada."

Ms. Priestly rushes to her office with a purposeful walk and a frown on her face, in a bad mood. She slams her coat on her assistant, Andrea's, desk, and blocks out Andrea's existence entirely until she is enthroned behind her behemoth black desk. She snarls out another assistant's name, but Andrea knows that if she does not scramble, in seconds, to Ms. Priestly's beck and call, her boss will shoot out another condescending dart that will pierce her like salt in an open wound. Given the force of the dart, it is surprising that Ms. Priestly then whispers barely audible and incomplete orders that will set Andrea in further turmoil. It takes Ms. Priestly mere seconds to outline what she wants, but takes Andrea seemingly forever to decipher all of it. So this is the renowned and incontrovertible Miranda Priestly, editor in chief of the famous "Runway" magazine.

As experienced by author Dr. Katrina Burrus, while coaching toxic executives in multinational companies, this article describes their behaviour and effect in organizations, the difference between a powerful leader and a toxic one and, f, and Dr. Burrus experience as to how to deal with toxic executives.

What does Miranda Priestly have in common with other abrasive executives? She gives crisp instructions, so as not to be bothered explaining anything to subordinates in detail. She has more important issues to resolve. Indeed, she and others like her have exceptional analytical ability, commanding presence, and incisive minds. In their wake, they promote tough, take-no-prisoners environments, in which everyone had best keep up or get out the way. Those who cannot keep up are left behind, pushed aside, or stranded, at best, or walked upon and humiliated, at worst.

These toxic, yet high-performing, executives inflict pain upon and destroy the self-confidence of those working for them. Their demands for high standards, brilliant capacity to go to the core of any issue, pointed questions, and natural ability to dominate conversation can scarcely be matched by peers, bosses, or subordinates. They will not allow anyone to forget a failing, as illustrated by their ironic comments, rolling of the eyes, and quick, incisive, humiliating remarks, preferably in front of others, to show their superiority. These are all means by which toxic executives dominate the arguments they so relish winning. And yet, these devils have a passion for control and a compulsive need for perfectionism which make them constantly battle with their own self-doubt.

What is the difference between a powerful leader and a toxic one? Powerful leaders are demanding and brilliant professionals, but so are most high-performing, toxic ones! But a conversation with a powerful leader leaves you energized by an inspiring model, empowered to be the best you can be. The toxic executive leaves you feeling idiotic, subhuman, destroyed, and humiliated.

Why is there such a difference in these two extremes of otherwise high-performing executives? During my coaching programs, I have found that effective leaders modulate their behaviors according to each context and person with whom they interact. If they work with someone who is highly motivated, but inexperienced and less competent than themselves, the powerful leader's expectations and mentoring adjust to the circumstances. Toxic executives, however, apply the same high standards for all, including themselves. This can have devastating consequences, when highly motivated, young individuals, with little competence or experience, proudly show their work, only to have it ruthlessly torn apart.

Having reviewed their devastating effects on subordinates, what are the consequences of toxic executives' behavior on organizations? Ironically, toxic executives are often either protected, or not adequately dealt with, by their superiors. Because toxic executives are high achievers, and usually produce outstanding results without having groomed a successor, their own bosses and organizations might find themselves in a bind if the toxic executive were to leave. The toxic executive may leave behind him a team that is shell-shocked, lacking confidence, no longer used to speaking up or taking risks, and fearful of asking for direction.

Thus toxic executives' misbehavior often remains unchecked. Their superiors often put results ahead of reason, rationalizing the high performance, and avoiding the conflict and consequences of crossing such a fierce predator nipping at their own heels and hierarchy. Even unintimidated superiors are often at a loss as to how to handle such characters. In my coaching practice, I often see staff turnover and absenteeism at levels that begin to threaten the viability of the department before any action to rectify the situation takes place. Inaction finally becomes unacceptable, as general discontent in the organization begins to paralyze the department or company.

Now you might ask yourself, "Do ingrained, evil personalities change? Can a zebra change its stripes?" The likely answer is no. But are these toxic bosses evil, or are they simply unaware of the consequences of their behavior? Are toxic bosses in denial, prey to internal demons, or do they take pleasure in humiliating others? In my experience, coaching such individuals in multinational organizations, the toxic executive is highly results-oriented and geared toward optimizing performance and returns. Anything or anyone perceived as obstructing those results is harshly treated. Thus, any attempt at a fix needs to tap into this all-important, bottom-line orientation.

That outlook is central. As a coach, if you perceive toxic executives as evil, show fear, or share their superiors' expressions of frustration, you are likely to be perceived as a nuisance, and swatted like a fly on the wall. Remember that, as powerful predators, toxic executives are quick to see and dispatch any threats. Similarly, appealing to toxic executives' goodwill or morality will not work. They know that the company pays them to get results and not to hold people's hands. Instead, if you enter the case as an objective investigator researching the facts, no one witness in particular can sway you. This is no easy challenge, as you may be confronted with the pain inflicted on a number of witnesses, and the toxic executive's laser-like strategies and style. So what strategy will work, if any?

The coach's task is to build a business case for toxic executives to want to change. Provide objective raw data, for these bright analytical minds to evaluate, for themselves: how they are perceived, and the consequences of their behavior on their careers and organizations. Tap into their perfectionism, and get it working for, not against, their impact on others. Toxic executives like control, and, indeed, it is their decision to change or not. But if they decide to change, after bringing them irrefutable, objective data to assess how they are perceived by people they respect, they will unleash their considerable talents on making that change happen. The coach then partners with them, to enhance their self-awareness, their sense of observation, and their empathy for themselves and others.

If toxic executives put their minds to it, they can become inspiring, even transformative, leaders. Having seen revolutionary changes in these previously poisonous executives, I know that such change is possible, and within the scope of these executives' power to achieve results. It is truly a privilege to work with them. As many said to Miranda Priestly's assistant in "The Devils Wear Prada" "A thousand girls would die for this job".

Dr Katrina Burrus