

RESEARCH NOTE

Abstract

People high in psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism—collectively known as the Dark Triad—are more likely to engage in counterproductive work behavior. These same personality traits, however, may be adaptive or beneficial in certain careers or roles. “The Dark Triad: Considerations in Hiring, Employment, and Termination” is an explainer video that provides supervisors and human resources professionals with techniques to mitigate the challenges associated with these traits in order to maximize employees’ positive contributions.



About The Threat Lab

The Defense Personnel and Security Research Center (PERSEREC) founded The Threat Lab in 2018 to realize the Department of Defense (DoD) Counter-Insider Threat Program Director’s vision to incorporate the social and behavioral sciences into the mission space. Our team is headquartered in Seaside, California, and includes psychologists, sociologists, policy analysts, computer scientists, and other subject matter experts committed to workforce protection.

The Dark Triad: Considerations in Hiring, Employment, and Termination

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Introduction

People high in Dark Triad personality traits—psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism—are at greater risk of engaging in counterproductive work behavior (CWB), including insider threat incidents (Jakobwitz & Egan 2002; Maasberg et al., 2015). These same personality traits, however, can be adaptive or beneficial in certain roles or positions. For instance, individuals high in Machiavellianism are skilled strategic thinkers and alliance builders (Carre et al., 2020; Spain, 2019). Depending on the job requirements, it may not be ideal to screen out individuals high in Dark Triad traits during the hiring and selection process.

Organizations need tools to minimize the challenging behaviors associated with Dark Triad traits and maximize the associated skills and capabilities. The National Insider Threat Task Force (NITTF) and the Department of Defense Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security (OUSD[I&S]) asked The Threat Lab, a program within the Defense Personnel and Security Research Center (PERSEREC), to create an artifact for supervisors and human resources (HR) professionals to meet this need. In response, we created an explainer video that provides resources and best practices across the employee life cycle. Our goal is not to diagnose or label employees, but to provide information to leverage these characteristics while mitigating their risks. This Research Note summarizes the foundational research on which the video is based and documents the development process.

Method

We organized our unclassified literature review in accordance with four goals: 1) define the Dark Triad and its associated behaviors; 2) understand the skills and job interests associated with Dark Triad traits; 3) identify problems or challenges that Dark Triad traits might create at work; and 4) identify best practices, strategies, and techniques for managing people with high levels of these traits.



Per the sponsor's request, we focused on literature and techniques relevant to managers, supervisors, and HR professionals in private sector organizations and government agencies.

Artifact Overview

We created an explainer video to ensure our artifact would be accessible to and engaging for our target audience. Explainer videos are short, focused videos that often (but not always) use animation to tell a story about a specific topic (Kramer & Bohrs, 2017). Our 10-minute video explains how managers and HR professionals can best address concerning behaviors related to the Dark Triad that may emerge throughout an employee's career, from selection and hiring through employment and possible termination. In order to provide the audience with the results of our literature review without compromising the effectiveness of the brief format, we integrated references to supplemental information throughout the video¹ that the viewer may visit when time allows.

Video Content

Using the results of the literature review, we designed the explainer video to fulfill three learning objectives. By the end of the video, the viewer will:

- 1) Understand the characteristics of psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism and the job skills and interests associated with each Dark Triad trait;
- 2) Learn about positive and negative effects that employees high in Dark Triad traits may have on their colleagues and organizations; and
- 3) Learn strategies to mitigate issues that might arise with these individuals over their careers and within the employment life cycle: Selection and Hiring, Employment, and Termination.

The Dark Triad

Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism are personality traits that together make up the Dark Triad. Although they share many similarities with some personality disorders such as antisocial and narcissistic personality disorder, these are considered dimensional personality traits, meaning that everyone has some degree of these traits. People high in Machiavellianism often manipulate others to meet their own needs. Those high in psychopathy are often described as having low empathy for others as well as high impulsivity, deceitfulness, and callousness. People high in narcissism are often described as egotistic, overconfident, entitled, and grandiose with an unrealistic sense of superiority (O'Boyle et al., 2012). Dark Triad personality factors sometimes raise the risk of insider threat problems (Harms et al., 2022; Lang & Shechter, 2011)

Selection and Hiring

Like most people, those high in Dark Triad traits tend to engage in impression management during selection and hiring, whereby they attempt to manage interviewers' perceptions of them to ensure that they are well-received (Buehl et al., 2019; Ingold et al., 2015). Unlike most people, however, people high in Dark Triad traits may be especially skilled at manipulating others' perceptions of their character and capabilities, which can make it difficult to accurately and objectively assess their skills (Fletcher, 1990; Levashina & Campion, 2006; Roulin & Bourdage, 2017).

¹ Contact us at PERSEREC@mail.mil to find out about the video's availability.

To address these challenges, the video and supplemental resources provide viewers with tips on *Interview Do's and Don'ts*, which include the use of structured over unstructured interviews. Compared with the latter, structured interviews include a set of questions delivered in a standardized order for all candidates, which reduces interviewer bias and provides greater validity (i.e., the ability to accurately assess applicants' ability to do the job).

When it is time to evaluate applicants against one another, the video emphasizes the value of using behaviorally anchored rating scales. By utilizing anchored rating scales, the interviewer assesses the applicant's responses against the actual job behaviors, descriptions, and specific examples of the position (i.e., anchors). As demonstrated in *Figure 1* below, these anchors represent points on the scale (e.g., a score of 1-7), help interviewers evaluate applicants objectively and consistently, and can increase selected candidate suitability (Levashina et al., 2014).

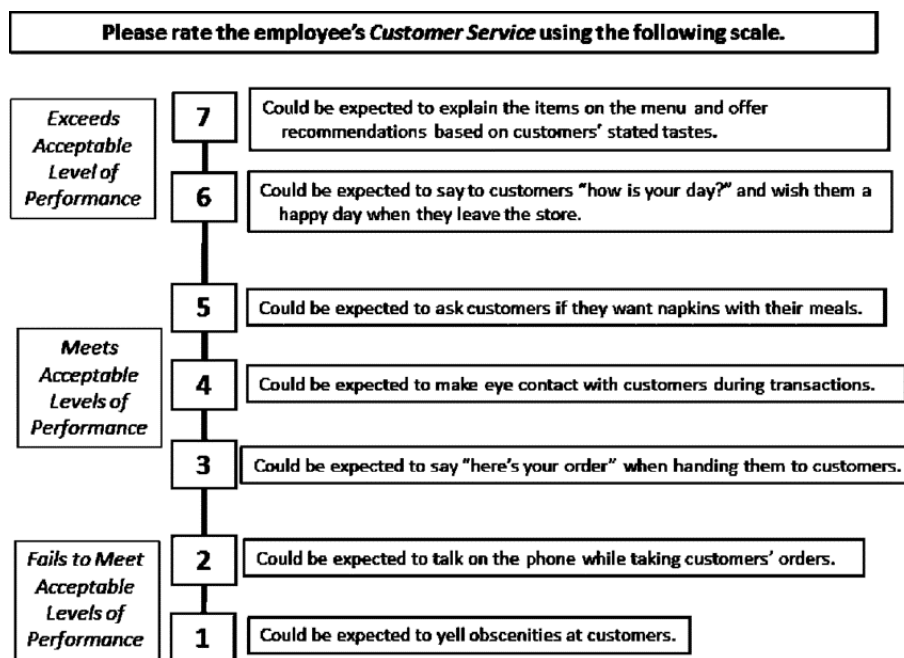


Figure 1. (Smith & Kendall, 1963 as cited in Kell et al., 2017)

During Employment

Once employed, people high in Dark Triad traits may be particularly likely to create conflict in the workplace. For example, these traits are associated with counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs), which are any behaviors that run counter to an organization's interests—such as theft, tardiness, sabotage, bullying, or harassment (Baughman et al., 2012; Cohen, 2016; LeBreton et al., 2018; O'Boyle et al., 2012). This higher risk of CWBs is related to a greater likelihood of interpersonal conflict and confrontation, so the video offers management strategies. Viewers learn how to prepare for a conversation with the employee, ways to discuss the problem and find solutions, and how to follow up with the employee after the discussion about their behavior.

At Termination

The video concludes by describing safe termination strategies in the event that there is a need to involuntarily separate an employee. The goal throughout the termination process is to ensure that

the employee is treated with respect and dignity and does not feel humiliated. This is critical because people high in narcissism can be highly vulnerable and may lash out if they are insulted, while people high in psychopathy might be malicious or vindictive. Therefore, managers and HR professionals should handle involuntary separations with particular care (Calhoun & Gallagher, 2020, Durvasula, 2020).

Managers and HR professionals should conduct a termination in a private space and in a direct and clear manner that avoids debate or argument (Calhoun & Gallagher, 2020; Karl & Hancock, 1999; Skowronski & Bedi, 2020). If there are safety concerns, they should coordinate with the Counter-Insider Threat Program and security officials ahead of time. They should follow established security practices, such as collecting employee badges, removing access to systems and facilities, and listening for potential threats or fallout during the termination discussion. The supplemental materials referenced in the video provide information about the *Who, What, Where, and When of Safe Termination Practices*.

Conclusion

We recommend that organizations share *The Dark Triad: Considerations on Hiring, Employment, and Termination* video along with the supplemental information found in the attached appendix with their managers and HR professionals to support best practices in selection and hiring, conflict management, and safe termination of employees who are high in Dark Triad traits. Future work in this area may explore additional high-risk personality traits or develop more detailed information on specific aspects of the employee life cycle and strategies to counter potential insider threats.

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Note: Sources used for the explainer video are cited in this References list and marked with an asterisk (*).

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Appendix A: Supplemental Information

Dark Triad Job Interests/Skills

Although individuals high in the Dark Triad may be in any position with any kind of organization, research suggests that, on average, they're often drawn to particular types of jobs. We'll start with Machiavellianism.

People high in Machiavellianism are especially drawn to positions with power and control, like leadership roles, because these allow them to exercise some of their strategic thinking and negotiation skills. They like business roles and political positions, and they generally avoid helping careers (like nursing and counseling).

Machiavellianism Job Interests:

- Leadership positions
- Avoid helping careers
- Political office and business careers

Machiavellians are particularly skilled at strategic thinking and alliance-building. They can be highly charismatic leaders.

Machiavellianism Skills:

- Strategic thinking
- Alliance-building
- Charisma

Similar to individuals high in Machiavellianism, people high in narcissism might also be drawn to entrepreneurial, political, or executive roles. However, unlike Machiavellians, narcissists might be drawn to helping positions, such as doctors, pastors, or humanitarians, as those roles provide them with the admiration and adulation they seek. Probably not surprisingly, narcissists are also found in high-profile, celebrity positions.

Narcissism Job Interests:

- Entrepreneurs
- Executives
- Politicians
- Helpers, doctors, pastors, humanitarians, artists
- Entertainment, media, communications, sports

Narcissists have specific skills that can be very useful in these high-profile roles. They are confident people, which can lead to success, especially if bluffing or risk-taking is required. They are highly invested in their work, especially when it fulfills their need to be admired and recognized. Like their Machiavellian colleagues, they also can be highly charismatic leaders due to their confidence and interest in the spotlight.

Narcissism Skills:

- Great confidence and bluster
- Highly invested in their work

- Charismatic leadership

Like the other traits in the Dark Triad, individuals high in psychopathy are often drawn to business and finance roles because they are especially unafraid of risk. Those high in psychopathic traits can be very comfortable as corporate professionals and senior leaders who have freedom to operate. They tend to avoid tedious, detail-oriented work and are bored easily, which may contribute to their desire to focus on the big-picture.

Psychopathy Job Interests:

- Business Religious, non-profit, medical, legal, criminal justice, civil service, and government organizations
- Finance
- Corporate professionals

People high in psychopathy can be highly charismatic. They are often charming and have strong presentation skills. They are fearless and lack remorse, something that is highly useful in negotiation and bluffing. They are willing to take risks, which can be an asset in some finance roles in particular.

Psychopathy skills:

- Charisma, charm
- Strong presentation skills
- Fearlessness, superficial charm, and lack of remorse
- Risk-taking and risk tolerance

Interview Do's and Don'ts

Interviews Do's:

- Use consistent questions for all applicants.
- Include both situational questions (“what would you do in this situation?”) and past behavior questions (“can you describe what you did when you encountered this in the past?”).
- Ask questions that measure the specific job-related behaviors and skills that the position requires.
- Plan to follow up: Planned follow-on questions can help interviewers gather more information if the initial answer isn't adequate or doesn't fully address the question. For example, “Can you tell me more about that?” or “What was the outcome?” Planning these follow-up questions ahead of time is important to make sure that you don't cue the applicant to the correct answers. It also ensures that you gather similar information from all applicants.
- Before following up, make sure that you allow the same amount of time for all applicants to answer, and follow up only if the answer is deficient, doesn't address the question, or the applicant is not providing information.

Interview Don'ts:

- Although it's uncomfortable, don't try to build rapport through small talk or casual conversation intended to put the applicant at ease. These activities can provide opportunities for the applicant to attempt to manage or manipulate your perceptions. It may help to ease

worries by warning applicants ahead of time that they will not be getting verbal or nonverbal feedback on their answers.

- Don't try to detect whether someone is lying or faking. Research shows that we aren't good at assessing whether someone is being honest (even if we think we are!).
- Verify the accuracy of application details and work history with references. If possible, get permission to call references the applicant hasn't listed to further confirm work history and identify potential problematic behaviors. If deciding between two candidates with strong technical skills versus strong collaborative skills, consider hiring the stronger team player and providing them with the technical training on the job.

Conflict Management

Before the conversation:

- Decide if something needs to be done.
 - Questions you can ask yourself include:
 - Is this behavior likely to happen again?
 - Does the behavior create a problem that needs to be fixed?
 - With the Dark Triad, it's very possible that people will repeat problematic behaviors that are related to these personality traits. When you see characteristics of the Dark Triad in your employees that create conflict or problems, in most cases, you need to address it.
- Identify the nature of the issue:
 - Is it a one-time issue, or is it a pattern of behavior? Your response to be specific to the nature of the behavior.
 - Because the Dark Triad are personality traits, problematic behaviors may be a pattern because they arise from a general characteristic of the person. When preparing to discuss issues with an employee, make sure you gather enough information to understand if the issue might have occurred multiple times.
- Gather information and set goals:
 - Gather any data that you'll need, like emails or reports, that might help demonstrate and describe the issue.
 - Set realistic goals for the conversation, keeping in mind that people high in the Dark Triad are unlikely to change their personality. Instead, focus on specific behaviors that you want them to understand and change.
 - Recognize your own emotional reaction and how you're feeling about the issue, so that you know how to manage your emotions.
- Create the setting:
 - Find a private, safe space to hold the conversation and ensure that you won't be interrupted. Ideally, this should be a neutral space, like an empty conference room, instead of someone's office. Especially with people high in the Dark Triad, you want to try to avoid a situation where you might damage their ego or make them feel attacked or humiliated.
 - Minimize distractions. Make sure you turn off your cell phone ringer and email for the conversation so that everyone can focus.

- Allow plenty of time to talk. You want to make sure everyone has time to speak. However, you also want to have specific start and end times to make sure you don't veer off track.

During the conversation:

- State the rules of engagement and the purpose of the conversation.
 - Highlight any ground rules—for instance, make sure that the employee knows the meeting will be private, confidential, respectful, and honest.
 - Define the purpose of the conversation relative to the behavior you want to change—for example, state that the goal is to find a way to ensure that the behavior or problem doesn't happen again, ideally with a timeframe for resolution.
 - Focus on the behavior, not the person. Again, remembering that the Dark Triad are personality traits, it's unlikely that you'll change a person's tendency to be self-centered. However, you can ask them to change a behavior that might be related to that trait.
 - Resist the urge to soften the message with compliments, as it can confuse the employee.
- Define the problem
 - Reach consensus on that problem so that you can discuss and agree on solutions.
 - Ask clarifying questions to understand perspectives and try to (genuinely!) express empathy with the employee's perspective.
 - Focus on the behaviors without trying to guess at why the behavior happened. Your goal is to reach agreement on the problem and highlight those points of agreement. Remember, don't diagnose the individual or label them with a trait like the Dark Triad; it's just to identify the behaviors that you want to see change.
- Identify solutions
 - Work with the employee to brainstorm possible solutions and a plan to move forward.
 - Make a list of ways that the behavior or the problem can be avoided in the future, ideally highlighting solutions that serve the needs of everyone involved.
- Create an action plan
 - Verbally summarize your plan, write it down, and have the manager and employee sign it. This will ensure that there are no disagreements on the decision that was made.
 - Develop a timeframe for that solution, and be specific. This might be a span of time by which you'd like to see the issue resolved (for example, a month), or it might be an upcoming event where you'd like to see the behavior change (for example, at the next team meeting).
 - Determine how you will monitor progress toward that goal. It has to be clear to the employee how they are going to demonstrate success. It's also important for the employee to understand what will happen if they fail to meet expectations in the future.

After the Conversation:

- Follow up
 - Email the employee to thank them for the discussion and provide them with a copy of the signed plan that includes specific tasks or rules that were discussed.
 - Remind the employee about the timeframe for accomplishing the agreed-upon solution.

- Monitor and prevent
 - Follow through with your plan to monitor success.
 - Communicate with the employee if you see ongoing issues, something that's always possible when behaviors emerge from personality traits like the Dark Triad.
- Conclude and reflect
 - Make sure the employee knows the ultimate outcome of the conversation. Make it clear to them when they have achieved the goals, or if there are still issues that need to be addressed. Even if the solution has been achieved, emphasize the importance of continued success in the area of the problem.
 - Reflect on the lessons you might be able to learn from this, and how you could avoid similar situations in the future.

The Who, What, Where, and When of Safe Termination:

- Who: The termination should be conducted by the individual's direct supervisor and potentially another manager and should not have a third-party present, as this can lead to feelings of disrespect or anger. Do not escort anyone from the building with armed guards, as this can lead the employee to feel embarrassed or humiliated and might lead to retaliation.
- What: Keep the language simple and direct and resist argument; don't discuss or debate. Mention positive employee characteristics. Have information and explanations ready for post-termination compensation and services.
- Where: Conduct the termination in a location where the manager can exit to end the meeting, and allow the employee some time to privately collect their thoughts and emotions. The employee's office or an empty conference room could work well if they afford privacy.
- When: Conduct the termination early in the work week which allows the employee time to begin the job search process rather than ruminate over the weekend on the job loss.