
Self-Secure Leaders and the Role of Attachment



By Manfred Kets de Vries, INSEAD Distinguished Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change

Socially awkward leaders need to recognise and address dysfunctional attachment patterns that could be lurking obstacles to their top jobs.

For people with healthy attachment behaviour patterns maintaining close contact with colleagues or friends is natural: trust comes easily and expectation of mutual goodwill and exchange forms a strong basis for all professional (and personal) relationships.

But for others, life is not so simple.

Many people, even highly successful professionals, are encumbered with dysfunctional attachment patterns formed in early childhood, which in later life lead to repetitive patterns of unhealthy thoughts and conflictive relationships.

These attachment disorders can manifest through dysfunctional behaviour such as the constant seeking of approval from others, excessive irritation towards clingy or needy colleagues, or the temptation to pull away and

create a distance in personal and professional exchanges.

Depending on the type and severity, attachment disorders can lead to problems with self-esteem; impulsiveness; discomfort with anger; jealousy; isolation; trust and intimacy issues; compulsive self-reliance; an inability to support others; lack of empathy; and difficulties creating and maintaining friendships.

If left untreated, dysfunctional behavioural patterns can intensify in times of stress and become more obvious as executives move up the career ladder.

We are all products of attachment behaviour

Attachment and separation are elemental forces that drive behaviour and influence relationships. In his seminal work on attachment, psychoanalyst John Bowlby noted that the ability to form attachments is biologically driven and part of our evolutionary heritage. Children's mental representations or working models of relationships, including their systems of thought, expectation, emotions and behaviour all act as a template for the way they engage and handle future relationships. How these attachment patterns resolve themselves influences our self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem. The failure to form a secure attachment with a care-giver early on sets a pattern which stays with a person throughout life.

More recent works on attachment behaviour propose four attachment styles based on two dimensions; the *anxiety* dimension - which focuses on the anxiety we may feel about rejection and abandonment - and the *avoidance* dimension - which reflects the discomfort associated with closeness and dependency.

People with low anxiety and low avoidance issues are likely to have secure attachment patterns in adulthood, a relatively high sense of self-esteem and good social skills.

Those with low avoidance but high anxiety are likely to be very self-critical and insecure. The lives of these anxious-ambivalent, pre-occupied, often "clingy" adults are usually not balanced. These people are very high maintenance, constantly want to be heard and will often provoke conflict to test others.

Meanwhile, adults with high avoidance patterns, either dismissive avoidant (those with low anxiety) or fearful avoidant (those with high anxiety) find

relating to others extremely difficult. Fearful avoidant people want human interaction and contact but are afraid of rejection while dismissive avoidant people seem to be completely unable to form personal relationships. They are uncomfortable being and interacting with others and prefer being by themselves.

Do I have what it takes?

Young executives with attachment disorders may encounter few problems early in their career when their role focuses on their area of expertise, such as strategising or deal-making. As they become more senior, this changes and they're expected to take a more proactive position, to inspire those around them, coach or mentor younger colleagues, take the lead on projects without deferring to more senior colleagues and make clear-headed, confident decisions.

Many CEOs attending INSEAD leadership programmes, find that as they take on these more senior roles they're asking continually themselves: Do I have what it takes? Am I too dependent on others? Why do I find it so difficult to express positive emotions? Why can't I inspire my team? Why do I find it so difficult to ask for help? What am I doing wrong? In many cases these negative perceptions can relate back to attachment disorders.

Take U.S. President, Barack Obama. His wariness and inability to get close to people outside his inner circle has been well-documented. This wariness, it could be assumed, reflects his unsettled upbringing and a lingering feeling of not really knowing where he belongs. While he has managed to overcome this to an extent, his lack of schmooze-ability (compared to former Presidents Bill Clinton or Lyndon Johnson) has handicapped his presidency.

On the other side of the coin there is Richard Branson, an example of an executive who has always been very secure in his skin. As a matter of fact, in the course of my research I did meet both his parents, and found them to be very loving, supportive people. This reflects in Branson's style. He has no problems knowing how to approach people or interacting with others.

Difficult to change

Like the elephant, attachment disorders are quite resistant to change, but they can be modified. Positive new life experiences and appropriate interventions can be the catalyst to changing relationship patterns. But it's not easy.

As is the case with most change processes, the first step can only be taken when there is recognition of the problem. If a person with attachment disorders asks for help then a safe secure environment is needed where they can face their inner demons and reveal their vulnerabilities in a healing atmosphere.

This can be done in group or private coaching programmes, or with the help of a psychotherapist if necessary to encourage the individual to develop the capacity to trust and express emotions in a more appropriate manner. In extreme cases, antidepressant medication may be necessary.

Leadership is a team sport

Today with increased focus on authenticity and keeping things real, leaders can't afford to be too aloof. Attachment behaviour reflects itself in leadership style, and dysfunctional patterns can have a detrimental effect on an organisation. While personal change takes time, leadership teams can be restructured to compensate for a CEO's inability to create meaningful relationships.

But true recovery from attachment disorders only occurs when individuals look at themselves squarely and face their attachment dysfunctions and inner demons free from false perceptions.

They must realise that the way they deal with attachment issues will influence how they deal with problems at work and at home. People with attachment disorders need to come to grips with the issues from the past that are the source of their dysfunctional relationship patterns. They have to transcend old dysfunctional behaviour patterns and find new ones that are more adaptive to their current stage in life.



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