



## The Importance of Seeing the World in Shades of Grey



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

**Executives who see the world in stark contrasts miss the nuances of situations and are less able to compromise to meet common interests.**

Joan, a senior executive, wasn't the easiest person to deal with. Although she had many excellent qualities - she was creative, had a great capacity for work and was extremely knowledgeable about the industry - she also had the tendency to engage in drama and in doing so rapidly got on people's nerves. Joan was rigid in her outlook, had angry outbursts, was manipulative and constantly criticised everything. She seemed to always be involved in some kind of vendetta, forcing people to choose sides. In Joan's world there was no such thing as a middle ground, her thinking was exclusively black and white.

Joan had what is called a bivalent leadership style. For her, people were either good or bad. She would only deal with people she perceived as “good”, expressing disdain for those she saw as “bad” and as a consequence instigated intense strife wherever she went. Co-workers who were once friends, became enemies after the merest hint of criticism or perceived slight as she refused to concede she may have misinterpreted them or had distorted reality.

A 360-degree feedback report revealed just how far the toxicity had permeated the organisation. Her colleagues were tired of her insistence that they choose sides in her attempts to draw them into quarrels and it became evident that if things continued as they were, there was no chance the company was going to achieve the high performance targets it had identified.

Joan’s boss laid it on the line, she needed to change her behaviour or pack her bags. There was no question of her getting the promotion she was expecting.

Conscious of the value she brought to the company, he arranged for her to work with an executive coach to help her sort out her issues and change.

### **“Black and white” thinking distorts reality**

There are many people out there like Joan, bivalent individuals who are unable to integrate the positive and negative qualities of the self, splitting the world into friends and enemies while seldom examining their own behaviour and attitudes.

Like most behavioural patterns, “splitting” originates in childhood and is very much present in our world today. Religions are more than ready to split the world into believers and non-believers, Christians against Jews, Muslims against Christians; similarly politicians’ simplistic sound bites create the stark contrasting camps of Republican versus Democrat, Tory versus Labour.

In fact all of us at some time or another split our perceived reality into right and wrong. Typically we resort to this way of thinking when we are unable to handle the stress that accompanies highly complex situations. But if splitting occurs on a regular basis it can be seen as an indication of psychological rigidity and development arrest.

This compartmentalisation of opposites can produce a distorted picture of reality and restricts the range of our thoughts and emotions. When we look at a multifaceted situation through a binary lens we are bound to miss essential details. It harms relationships, diminishes our well-being and limits our understanding of the world. People with this kind of mindset seem to be incapable of reconciling the inconsistencies and ambiguities of human nature.

### **Coaching the bivalent executive**

Helping executives with a bivalent leadership style is like walking on eggshells. They are notoriously resistant to coaching interventions and quickly interpret any attempt at behavioural change as an attack.

The first step is getting them to acknowledge that people are not all good or bad, and that good people do make mistakes. Individuals like Joan need to become more skilled in reading their own and other people's minds. They need to accept that they may not understand as much as they think they do about other people's and their own inner thoughts, beliefs, desires and intentions.

When coaching Joan I had to be very careful about how I gave her feedback, knowing she reacted badly to criticism. So, instead of focusing on her tenuous work relationships I turned the lens of analysis onto our relationship in an attempt to make her more attentive to her own and others' mental state, encouraging her to have a more non-judgmental attitude, greater curiosity and enhanced compassion.

The challenge when coaching bivalent executives is to increase their psychological sensitivity by exploring alternative interpretations and intentions and encouraging them to understand how black and white thinking can damage relationship building and make it more difficult for them to compromise and cooperate with others in the pursuit of common interests. It is particularly important to enlighten them on the way anxiety can narrow their focus so they end up concentrating only on potential threats.

I also encourage bivalent people to keep a diary in which to reflect on each day's events. Recording thoughts in this way explicitly helps people think about them more deeply, an essential step in making them more effective at replacing negative, self-defeating thoughts with more nuanced realistic ones.

## Accepting the world in shades of grey

Gradually Joan began to learn how to react to situations more appropriately, she started to pay attention to her mood swings and think about what was happening to her before reacting. She came to realise that her bivalent leadership style meant that she was projecting her own fears and insecurities onto others. Slowly she began to accept that we all have flaws, that none of us is black or white, and to be a successful leader you have to let in the grey.

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