
Managing Thrill Seekers



By [Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries](#) , INSEAD Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change

Thrill- seeking employees' addiction to risk can create havoc in the workplace. Managed correctly, their fearlessness can be a great advantage to any organisation.

People who knew Lawrence Devon, a VP of Sales in a large retail group, viewed him as the quintessential sensation-seeker – a person who liked taking risks. At times, his colleagues wondered how he was able to manage such a tumultuous lifestyle. He seemed to be able to tolerate more chaos in his life than most people and possessed the enviable ability of keeping his cool when things got tough. Unfortunately, the way he behaved made him very difficult to manage.

When life in the office became too predictable, he let everyone know that he was bored, looking for ways to stir things up. Many believed that his bosses only tolerated him because of his stellar record in sales. Lawrence had always been among the best (if not the best) in acquiring new customers. He was well known for thinking “out-of-the-box” and was considered one of the most creative people in the firm.

Outside the office, Lawrence had the reputation of being a fun-loving, chain-smoking, heavy drinker and gambler, known for his wild parties and womanising. His adventurous vacations would include extreme activities such as hang gliding, parachuting and bungee jumping. His passion for racing cars had almost killed him. If that wasn't enough excitement, his two short, stormy marriages were something else. Rumour had it that he had always been into high-risk sexual behaviour. He seemed to be following Lord Byron's credo: "The great art of life is sensation, to feel that we exist, even in pain."

Recently, things had come to a head. Many of his co-workers were at a loss when one of their colleagues made a scene about Lawrence's involvement with his wife. The incident got the attention of the CEO who was now wondering how to deal with Lawrence. Should she let him go?

Type T personalities

Psychologist Frank Farley has labelled people like Lawrence – those searching for novel, complex, intense experiences – as having a thrill-seeking or "Type T" personality. They are addicted to stimulation, excitement and arousal. Only by taking extreme risks, by engaging in disinhibited behaviour, will they obtain the exhilaration that they are looking for.

Long before the Type T personality was recognised, psychiatrist Michael Balint distinguished between two kinds of people: the ocnophils, and the philobates. Ocnophils are the non-adventurous type. In their inner world, the fear of abandonment plays too big a role. They prefer to clutch at something firm when their security is at risk. In contrast, the philobates are more confident, more independent and seek out thrills. These two different behaviour patterns can be seen as extreme positions on a spectrum of neurotic conflict.

Unlike Balint, some neuroscientists have suggested that the question of whether or not an individual is a thrill seeker is not just a developmental issue but could be genetically based, linked to various hormones and neurotransmitters. (In making this assertion, we should keep in mind that while the basic architecture for what we will become is in place when we are born, the outcome very much depends on environmental exposure.) According to these neuroscientists, the brain structure of high-sensation seekers might be somewhat different from people who generally avoid risks. For example, Type T individuals, like Lawrence, may have fewer dopamine

receptors in their brains to record sensations of pleasure and satisfaction. To feel good in their skin, they may need higher levels of endorphin activity. Their level of testosterone, a hormone that seems to correlate with non-inhibitory behaviour, may also influence their thrill-seeking lifestyle.

Given what we know about hormonal behaviour, we can describe these people as real adrenaline junkies. They like to live on the edge. Some of these thrill seekers use their personality for good while others use it for bad, even engaging in sociopathic behaviour. They may turn to crime, violence or terrorism just for the thrill of it.

Not your “normal” office employee

The question is how to deal with these people? How can we channel the positive aspects of their character and lessen the negative aspects? How can we get the best out of them?

In answering these questions, we should keep in mind that thrill seekers like Lawrence will always have problems with more regulated society. Their behaviour is bound to cause a certain amount of conflict. At the same time, given their knack for adventure, many of these people will have the ability to attain the highest levels of creativity and innovation in science, business, government and education. But people who decide to hire them should be cognizant of what they are in for.

These Type T personalities can cause havoc with respect to more habitual organisational processes. The people who employ them need to be very careful in selecting work that will fit them. Because thrill seekers are quickly susceptible to boredom and dislike repetition, routine and dealing with people who are not stimulating, managers need to find creative solutions to channel their considerable energy into constructive paths. They are best suited for positions involving novel, stimulating and unconventional activities – unstructured tasks that require a high degree of flexibility.

People who manage thrill seekers also need to accept that, just as some people are good at being organised but aren't very creative, others are very creative but completely fail at being organised. The challenge is to help the Type T individuals to better structure their lives, while allowing space for the more spontaneous parts of their personalities.

Enlisting the help of co-workers with complementary skills can make a difference, effectively creating an “executive role constellation” whereby the sum will be greater than the parts. It is also a good idea to limit their responsibility in managing others – an activity that isn’t necessarily their strength.

Whatever efforts are made, however, senior executives should realise that Type T people will never turn into “normal” office employees.

A final comment concerning Lawrence: despite his many aptitudes, his position in his present company may no longer be salvageable. But he should view his likely dismissal as a learning opportunity – as the beginning of a journey to combine his considerable talents with a modicum of organisation. Meanwhile, future employers would do well to keep in mind that his ability to adapt easily to changing situations, to roll with the punches, and his knack of dealing with difficult people could be used to great advantage in any organisation.

Manfred Kets De Vries is the Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change at INSEAD and The Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt Chaired Professor of Leadership Development, Emeritus. He is the Founder of INSEAD's ***Global Leadership Centre*** and the Programme Director of ***The Challenge of Leadership***, one of INSEAD’s Top Executive Development Programmes. His most recent books are ***“You Will Meet a Tall, Dark Stranger: Executive Coaching Challenges”*** and ***“Telling Fairy Tales in the Boardroom: How to Make Sure your Organization Lives Happily Ever After.”***

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About the author(s)

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries is the Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change at INSEAD and the Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt Chaired Professor of Leadership Development, Emeritus.