
Why Leaders Should Embrace Their Dark Side



By Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries , INSEAD

Not acknowledging your shadow is a barrier to being an authentic leader.

To many, John seemed a highly ethical person. Disciplined and hardworking, he graduated from an Ivy League college and joined an investment bank. Keen to prove that the financial misbehaviour that had tarnished the profession had been the work of a few bad apples, John became actively involved with a number of NGOs, which amplified his already stellar reputation.

However, a strange metamorphosis took place after John got married. He then joined the office of a business tycoon who was the opposite of everything John had stood for. To the great disappointment of his friends, John vehemently defended his new boss' behaviour and distorted facts in interviews. People wondered if his wife's considerable material needs were behind this change. Others thought perhaps substance abuse was to blame.

Unfortunately, this example is not an outlier. These transformations seem to occur regularly, not only in business but also in politics, a world where

principle is often traded for position. Many people like to be close to sources of power and are willing to pay the moral fee if required. Perhaps their ethical compass had always been just for show. The lure of glory and money eventually overwhelms any call to conscience.

So, what are the psychological dynamics behind these transformations? Why do people undergo what looks like a sudden change in character?

The shadow self

For a long time, John had been successful in presenting himself as an ethical person. Then a darker side came to the fore. Do we all have a hidden side that surfaces under the right conditions? For answers, we can turn to Carl Jung, the father of analytical psychology.

Jung popularised the term the “shadow” to represent the least desirable side of our nature, the aspects of our character that we try to reject or ignore. This shadow consists of repressed desires, emotions and impulses which are hidden from conscious awareness but may take over a person’s actions.

To live as fully integrated human beings, Jung suggested that we recognise this darker side of ourselves. What we repress does not just disappear. On the contrary, if it remains unexamined, our darker side may exert more and more control over our thoughts, emotions, choices and actions.

In other words, not acknowledging our shadow is one of the largest barriers in any person’s journey towards living authentically. The non-integration of the shadow side of our personality can have serious consequences. In extreme cases, people may suffer from dissociative identity disorder, a mental condition characterised by the presence of at least two distinct and relatively enduring personality states.

Applying this lens to our case, John’s sudden transformation may have been due to his shadow finally coming to the fore. Despite what he professed, perhaps the lifestyle of the rich and famous had always attracted him – the source of that wealth be damned. But what psychological acrobatics did John use in order to live with himself? What defence mechanisms gave him peace of mind?

How rationalisation and compartmentalisation come to the rescue

Human beings are not rational – we are rationalising animals. When our conscience disapproves of certain actions, we find excuses to make them acceptable. Through rationalisation, we justify controversial behaviours or feelings in a seemingly logical manner as a way to avoid the true explanation. It helps us to maintain self-respect or avoid guilt over something that, deep down, we think is wrong.

Compartmentalisation is another defence mechanism we invoke when our shadow side takes over. When we are unable to deal emotionally with certain issues, we put them into “compartments” and store them into some dark corners of our mind. This relieves the discomfort and anxiety caused by the presence of conflicting values, emotions and beliefs within ourselves.

A good example of this form of mental acrobatics is an executive who is sexually harassing his female employees but behaves like a loving father to his daughters. Or a senator who professes to have high ethical standards while defending his president who is a liar and philanderer. Quite often, people struggling with addictions are also masters of rationalisation and compartmentalisation to avoid dealing with their problem.

Unfortunately, the dark side of these defence mechanisms is that they can lead to a fracturing of the self. As a result, our shadow rules the day. Although our life may give the appearance of harmony, it is out of synch. This psychological disequilibrium can manifest itself in troubled personal relationships, anxiety (even nightmares), depression and other forms of mental discomfort.

The way out of self-deception

Leaders like John must remember that an integrated personality structure is a prerequisite of mental health. To buffer the negative effects of our shadow, we should accept and integrate its characteristics into our general personality structure. This starts by acknowledging inconsistent behaviour.

We should also try to recognise the external stimuli that make us resort to rationalisation and compartmentalisation. Once these triggers are clearly defined, we should avoid them. We must also accept the fact that we all have fears and insecurities that direct our behaviour. The next step is to work on overcoming them.

At the end of the day, the real challenge is to stop deceiving ourselves. To stay more grounded in reality, leaders like John would benefit from a support network of family, close friends and other people with whom they can talk (that includes finding a coach). Failing that, one's leadership brand can be permanently damaged.

To maintain good mental health, consider the words of Gandhi: "Happiness is when what you think, what you say and what you do are in harmony."

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