

# Line of fire

A study looks at how fire brigade managers behave under pressure and implications for health and teamwork

Research on management has tended to focus on leadership rather than incompetence. Research on why managers fail has been inconclusive and speculative.

This study considered how a manager's personality changes when subject to stress, and how this might affect subordinate colleagues' perceptions of them.

Previous studies with crew in critical incident situations had considered the impact of personality upon team effectiveness. The Chidester report found that "accident rates correlated significantly with the personality of the captain" and a study of ambulance personnel (Tyler, 1997) showed that those with high scores of neuroticism and high stress levels were more prone to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). None had looked at how fire fighters react under pressure, or how colleagues reacted to their management style.

This research was with a national Fire Brigade of 6,000 fire fighters across 113 stations where 205 volunteers participated.

## Team cohesion and the dark side

Trust in managers is eroded by 'dark side' behaviours resulting in a withdrawing of support, loss of respect, alienation from colleagues and less cohesion within a team. When it involves those in emergency services, this is potentially catastrophic.

The Hogan Development Survey (HDS) considers the behaviours displayed by managers who 'derail', that is, behaviours seen as "inappropriate for the situation or self-defeating for the manager". The HDS predicts people will

### Too much of a good thing

In times of stress or strong emotion, "the very behaviours that distinguish leaders from other colleagues have the potential to produce disastrous outcomes for their organisation" (Conger, 1990).

The Hogen Development Survey shows that:

- enthusiastic becomes volatile
- shrewd becomes mistrustful
- careful becomes cautious
- independent becomes detached
- focused becomes passive-aggressive
- confident becomes arrogant
- charming becomes manipulative
- vivacious becomes dramatic
- imaginative becomes eccentric
- diligent becomes perfectionistic
- dutiful becomes dependent

## 'Trust in teamwork is vital...good teamwork really does save lives'

react to pressure in one of three ways — neurotic, narcissistic and obsessive — and that subordinate colleagues are more likely than superiors to notice such behaviour. It is new in that it addresses aspects of personality previously unassessed and is based on the premise that personality alters under pressure, allowing dark sides to show.

According to Jung, our dark side contains "those aspects of our personality that we keep hidden from others..." (1951). Research by Hogan and Hogan (1997) revealed that in times of stress or strong emotion, when defences are weaker and less well managed, individuals' dark side is more likely to manifest.

What moderates dark side behaviours is an ability to manage emotional nature. When emotional adjustment is low, and there are high scores on the HDS, there is cause for concern.

Being able to depend on one's colleagues in times of danger is a crucial component. As one watch commander said, "...trust in teamwork is vital...good teamwork really does save lives". A lack of trust for the manager would present a serious problem for fire fighters.

### Results: culture and accepted behaviour

The results were interesting because they indicated a cultural acceptance of particular characteristics which might mask post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Overall, there was much lower stress, anxiety and depression in watch commanders than comparable norm groups, and lower dark side behaviours. The most self-reported style was neurotic, with the highest subscale of volatility. Under pressure, these people would move away from others, withdraw, and become reclusive and detached. They would react with temper outbursts, hostility and aggression. However, this was not the style most observed by subordinates, despite self-reporting levels.

The second main result was the correlation between obsessive scores and subordinate ratings. This is the managerial style least liked — and most noticed — by subordinates. This

## Conclusion

Results indicate this sample of watch commanders has lower levels of depression, anxiety and stress than comparable groups. This may be partly down to experience and the fact that seasoned fighters possess more effective cognitive and behavioural coping strategies.

The correlation between watch commanders with high scores on the neurotic scale and higher levels of stress has implications for both the watch commander and the fire brigade. The potential for stress to affect watch commanders needs to be acknowledged when they are selected for promotion to managerial ranks.

All this needs to be considered in light of an individual's emotional adjustment and stability. Because the HDS deals with perceived negative behaviours, it is important to have personal developmental feedback following test administration and report. Effective leaders and managers need high levels of characteristics measured by the HDS — enthusiasm, confidence, shrewdness and charm. It is when managers fail to manage emotional responses and behaviours that they might cause concern.

The aim of management development is not to diminish these qualities but to help the watch commanders manage them and foster greater self-awareness and sensitivity to their own and others styles of reacting to pressure. Developing this could be a valuable part of future management training.

involves moving towards other people when they are pressured to placate and to alleviate their own anxiety. They are reluctant to delegate, unable to prioritise, paralysed by indecision and, most of all, seen as being rather too keen to please their superiors.

Watch commanders with high scores on the obsessive scale need to be aware that, when they are behaving in this style, subordinates perceive them to be less loyal to the group which may threaten cohesion and commitment.

Although there were lower overall stress levels, 8% of watch commanders indicated they experienced severe/extremely severe stress. Coupled with the self-reported neurotic styles of management, this has important implications for the manifestation of PTSD.

Watch commanders with neurotic style are the least likely to ask for help, just when they most need it, as they tend to withdraw from others at times of stress and become mistrustful of help offered. Additionally, traits within the neuroticism scale — temper, aggression, hostility, withdrawing from others — were not seen as dark side behaviours due to the culture of the fire brigade. It is still very much a male-dominated, rank-oriented organisation and these behaviours may have been perceived as masculine and therefore appropriate.

Angela Mansi is senior lecturer in occupational psychology at Westminster Business School and The Open University. She is a director of WorkLife Management. [mansia@wmin.ac.uk](mailto:mansia@wmin.ac.uk)