



Exploring the Reservoirs of Drivers and Blockers (Conscious and Unconscious): Other Personality Traits and Characteristics

You get to love your pretence. It's true, we're locked in an image, an act—and the sad thing is, people get so used to their image, they grow attached to their masks. They love their chains.
Jim Morrison, lead vocalist of 'The Doors'

6.1 SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem represents a universal dispositional feature related to an overall perception of self-efficacy and worth (Judge, Thoresen, Pucik, & Welbourne, 1999). Research suggests that high levels of self-esteem are linked with low levels of stress or better coping with stress during change (Ashford, 1988; Callan, Terry, & Schweitzer, 1994). Self-esteem is seen as a key need of the individual (Maslow, 1954), although not just for its own purposes.

Self-esteem reflects the need for belongingness, to be acknowledged by others and be regarded as one of them (Bachkirova, 2011). Research by Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs (1999) indicates that self-esteem is related to anxiety about interpersonal rejection and social marginalization. Leary et al. (1999) sought to understand why people struggle with self-esteem: whether the struggle provides protection against anxiety or ambiguity; whether it boosts their goal accomplishments or whether, perhaps, the struggle is just for the sake of it. However, their conclusion is predicated on a fundamental belief about human nature:

Because solitary human beings in a primitive state are unlikely to survive and reproduce, psychological systems evolved that motivated people to develop and maintain some minimum level of inclusion in social relationships and groups. (p. 89)

Concerns about self-esteem are common for the first level of ego in adult development (Bachkirova, 2011), that is the “socialized mind”, where it can act as a blocker, although Kegan (1982) would contend that the term “self-esteem” is not relevant for people even at this stage, since their “esteem” rather than stemming from the sense of “self” comes from what others think. At the second stage (i.e. “self-authoring mind”), self-esteem issues are unlikely to be as pronounced. They might, however, at times surface as confidence issues that one may face, with regard to accomplishing a specific task or performance, and also signal a need for improved judgment about objectives, aspirations and the world (Bachkirova, 2011).

A good example is Adriano,¹ a divisional CEO in a news and information agency. Adriano’s developmental objective is to improve his relationship with others. Adriano, however, exhibits negative dominant behavior and concedes that he’s “*not open to criticism*” and has “*unrealistic expectations of others*”. He holds the belief that being more open to everything—feedback, dialogue, people and so on—will “*limit his freedom*” and he will no longer be in “*control*”. These factors are central to his own view of his self-esteem and are acting as a blocker in his efforts to make the change in his behavior and achieve his objective of improving his dynamics with others.

Self-esteem, however, when under check, can act as a driver for this self-authoring stage. In research, high self-esteem is associated with a number of positive behaviors such as persistence at challenging jobs (Shrauger & Rosenberg, 1970), satisfaction (Diener, 1984) and less neuroticism (Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001). In the case of Fred² (a case we discussed in the previous chapter), his positive self-view and the self-confidence that he could head the restructuring initiative acted as a driver in helping him accomplish his objective.

Self-esteem issues are more prominent for people at the “unformed ego” (socialized mind) stage. “Unformed ego” (socialized mind) requires help from other people as well as from the norms and standards set by

¹ An example from our research (see Sect. 10.1, Example 31).

² An example from our research (see Sect. 10.1, Example 26).

them. Individuals at this stage are not prepared to deal with new circumstances without depending on already familiar and acknowledged rules or recommendations from other people. This results in a gap between how an individual sees him or herself and the expectation of him or her (Bachkirova, 2011). We believe that self-esteem, here, may be seen as a blocker, a discrepancy between what is required from an individual and what he or she can actually do. Issues of low self-esteem may surface if people are worried about not being accepted by others because they may be unable to fulfill others' expectations.

Let us take, Roger,³ a senior executive in an energy infrastructure organization. Roger's developmental objective is to be more assertive with his team. Roger, however, feels very hesitant to voice his opinions openly when he is uncertain. He believes that he "*will lose credibility, if he's not always right*" and "*will be perceived as unfriendly*". He also sees himself as "*compromising too much*" and feels "*blocked*" when faced with "*unfamiliar situations*". Roger's excessive focus on other people's perspectives and their approval shows that he has a "socialized mind" (see Kegan & Lahey, 2009), associated with self-esteem struggles. His low self-esteem here is acting as a blocker, preventing him from speaking up, and impeding his objective to be more assertive with his team.

There are two other views on the nature of self-esteem offered in the literature: the self-consistency motive and the self-enhancement motive (Baumeister, 1993, 1999; Mruk, 2006). The self-consistency motive steers people to look for information that reinstates their beliefs (positive or negative) about themselves. It may be difficult to deny or alter these views about oneself once they are established. The self-enhancement motive on the other hand steers people to gain information that portrays them positively and ignore information that might reflect negatively on them. As such, self-esteem is marked with the potential for distortion (Claxton, 1994; Dunning, 2006), and numerous studies show various ways people may protect themselves against attacks to their own self-assessment⁴ (Fingarette, 2000; Goleman, 1997).

In some people, self-esteem (as the overall value that one places on oneself as a person) signals their current state with regard to how they

³An example from our research (see Sect. 10.1, Example 27).

⁴This is similar to the construct of confirmatory bias in decision sciences (see Evans, 1989; Plous, 1993), which refers to people's propensity to deliberately disregard or neglect information inconsistent with their beliefs.

perceive they are being accepted and acknowledged by others, in case they need support to overcome their resistance behaviors. We see high self-esteem (when in check, i.e. not over-confidence or hubris) as a motivational force, a driver influencing someone's behaviors and helping them to bring about the change desired. For example, Emma,⁵ who we highlighted earlier when discussing emotions, also tapped into a strong personal drive for increasing her self-worth as part of her achieving her development objective. Low self-esteem, on the other hand, can essentially be seen as a blocker, making one believe change is a threat and evoking resistance behaviors and attitudes.

6.2 LOCUS OF CONTROL

Locus of control as a dispositional variable is employed to demonstrate the variations in the manner information is understood and analyzed (Hyatt & Prawitt, 2001; Tsui & Gul, 1996). Locus of control refers to one's beliefs of one's capacity to apply control over the context (Rotter, 1966). Individuals with an internal locus of control see themselves having control over their destiny, while the ones with the external locus of control see the role of powerful forces such as luck, chance or fate in exercising control over their lives (Cobb-Clark & Schurer, 2013; Furnham & Cheng, 2016; Lefcourt, 2013; Rotter, 1966).

Research indicates that individuals with an internal locus of control actively look for information relevant to the task, in comparison to the individuals with the external locus of control (Organ & Greene, 1974; Pines & Julian, 1972; Seeman, 1963). For example, Seeman (1963) suggested that the active information-collecting tendency of the individuals with an internal locus of control was apparent only when the information under consideration was pertinent to significant goals.

This, Seeman (1963) believed, could be because individuals with an internal locus of control may recognize the importance of information for accomplishing the goal faster than their external counterparts. Further, he argues that individuals with an internal locus of control are clearer in their objectives and values than ones with an external locus of control, and therefore tend to actively respond to the opportunities that support those goals (Chong & Eggleton, 2003).

⁵ An example from our research (see Sect. 10.1, Example 6).

With regard to change and the uncertainty associated with it (Ashford, 1988; Callan et al., 1994; Nelson, Cooper, & Jackson, 1995), an individual's sense of control over the context will affect his or her psychological response to change (Chen & Wang, 2007). The association between locus of control and organizational change is indicated by studies, with most of them linking an internal locus of control with better adjustment (Ashford, 1988; Israel, House, Schurman, Heaney, & Mero, 1989) and effective coping mechanisms (Anderson, 1977; Callan et al., 1994). In other words, studies suggest that having a more internal locus of control enables people to better manage unfavorable environmental influences (Callan et al., 1994).

We contend that the belief that one has control over one's destiny (internal locus of control) can act as a strong driver—a motivator enabling an individual to apply more effort in making the change or achieving his or her objective. Individuals with an external locus of control, on the other hand, are less likely to be motivated to make an effort to produce the change. For them, the drive to initiate change takes a back seat to influences that are seen to be beyond one's control. Here, the external locus of control acts as a blocker, impeding one's change efforts.

We explain this through the example of Barbara,⁶ a manager in a consumer goods company. In a group coaching session, she explains the reasons why she received low ratings in several leadership dimensions of her 360° feedback. Her observation and perception of her situation is that she's a victim of the environment as well as other people affecting her ability to exercise her leadership effectively. She feels that everything is outside her control and refuses to take any ownership of her leadership approach. In exploring her drivers and blockers, her coach and group mates help make her aware of her strong external locus of control. Developing self-awareness about her default victim position was the first step in her moving toward a more internal locus of control and thereby drive change.

6.3 SELF-EFFICACY

Self-efficacy⁷ is a “belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainment” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Unlike locus of control which refers to an individual's beliefs about

⁶An example from our research (see Sect. 10.1, Example 28).

⁷Self-efficacy is different from self-esteem which “represents a self-perception about one's competence and value”

their capacity to implement the necessary reaction, which ensures achieving the desired results, self-efficacy pertains to whether the outcomes of these endeavors are within one's control (Bandura, 1997).

There are a number of ways through which self-efficacy might influence one's change efforts. The concept of self-efficacy draws in a "mobilization or motivational component" that enables the adjustment of behavior to match the changing situations (Gist & Mitchell, 1992). Furthermore, research (e.g. Schunk, 1983) has observed that self-efficacy is specifically prominent in situations that are considered new and stressful to people. Lower levels of self-efficacy, on the other hand, are associated with "defensive behavior", for example, resistance or protecting turf (Ashforth & Lee, 1990).

These studies indicate that high levels of self-efficacy can act as a driver in change efforts, while low levels are a blocker. In other words, people with high self-efficacy are more likely to be optimistic about their commitments to tasks or change challenges; for example, the idea that "When I commit to a task or take up a challenge, I am positive that it will be successful" or "I can accomplish it if I put my heart and head into it". Whereas people with lower levels of self-efficacy are more likely to feel less confident of their own ability to make the change, that is the idea that "I feel that I am not up for it".

Self-efficacy (as one's estimate of one's fundamental ability to cope, perform and be successful), which taps into positive determination, can act as a powerful driver for supporting change. One example is Sylvia,⁸ a divisional head in a hospital, who we worked with a few years back, and who demonstrated self-efficacy characteristics of high confidence and high result focus. Sylvia at that time was in charge of an event that was supposed to take place in her organization in a couple of weeks' time. Sylvia, however, had to manage it jointly with a colleague she was "*not fond of*" and who had a "*completely different working style*". Both individuals, however, had similar strong personas and displays of confidence. Although they had a different skill set, they were both results driven as a display of their confidence. As such, Sylvia determined to be able to put aside their other differences and work constructively with her colleague toward making the event a success. Here Sylvia's positive self-efficacy acted as a driver helping her to accomplish her objective.

(Donald & Pierce, 1998, p. 51).

⁸An example from our research (see Sect. 10.1, Example 32).

We note that in the commentary of this chapter we treat self-esteem, self-efficacy and locus of control as distinct areas and that there is debate in the literature on their relationships to one another.⁹

6.4 POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE AFFECTIVITY

Positive affectivity is a key personality disposition, mainly demonstrated in features such as optimism, confidence, enthusiasm, well-being and affiliation. It is broadly linked with the positive worldview (Judge et al., 1999). A research study by Bowman & Stern (1995) found positive affectivity to be positively correlated with coping strategies (such as problem solving and problem reappraisal) in stressful work situations.

Likewise, research by Holahan & Moos (1987) suggests personality traits of confidence and easy-going disposition are significant predictors of effective coping with regard to life events. As these traits denote significant aspects of positive affectivity, it can be expected that high levels of positive affectivity will act as a driver in an individual's attempt to change. That is, people with high positive affectivity levels will be inclined to look for ways to proactively change for betterment (Duffy, Ganster, & Shaw, 1998) (i.e. "If I improve, it will be much easier for me to manage and this will help everyone—me as well as others").

Negative affectivity, on the other hand, has been defined as a personality characteristic manifested in attributes such as negative emotional states (Kaplan, Bradley, Luchman, & Haynes, 2009; Watson & Clark, 1984). Negative affectivity is linked with distress and involves an individual's tendency to concentrate on negative aspects (Bowman & Stern, 1995; Penney & Spector, 2005). Bowman & Stern (1995) also found a positive correlation between negative affectivity and avoidance coping indicating that their use might lead to an increase in negative emotions in the workplace. As such, we believe negative affectivity can act as a blocker in an individual's change efforts. In other words, negative affectivity meddles with the thinking needed for achieving goals and objectives (Frisch, 2006) (i.e. "I feel that no good outcome will come out of the process" or "I don't think making a change is possible or worthwhile" or "Even if I put in effort, I might not be able to cope with the change process").

⁹Although the majority of the studies (e.g. Abouserie, 1994; Horner, 1996) treat these constructs in isolation, research by Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen (2002) suggests that measures that assess self-esteem, locus of control, neuroticism and generalized self-efficacy are strongly related and may be the indicators of the one latent higher order construct.

6.5 RISK AVERSION

Risk aversion refers to the tendency of people to look for (risk seeking) or keep away from risky situations (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). A research paper by Maehr & Videbeck (1968) on risk aversion found that risk-averse individuals are less likely to take chances and are more likely to get distressed in situations where risk was prominent. This was further confirmed by studies conducted by Cable & Judge (1994) and Judge et al. (1999). Since change is often perceived as taking risk, individuals who are risk-averse might view new and risk-related situations negatively. For them, risk aversion acts as a blocker in achieving a change or making a decision.

An example of this is Shirley,¹⁰ a senior lecturer, working in a university that had switched to a different web application (an e-learning platform) from the one it used earlier to support contemporary pedagogy. This initiative was not welcomed by Shirley, and like most of her academic friends, she was uncomfortable using it. She believed she “*had invested a lot of effort in mastering the old system, and it was working well*”. The change would mean that she would “*have to spend a lot of time understanding and learning about it, and changing her materials*”. She also believed that she would “*feel stressed*” if she could “*not look professional to her students when operating it*” or “*if something goes wrong*” (there is a risk of accidentally sending incorrect information to students for which she would be held accountable—not the IT area). This risk-averse attitude stemmed from an apprehension of change, fear of feeling stress and concern about risking her reputation. This served as a blocker, impeding commitment and effort to adopt, embrace and accept the change.

The willingness to take risks (risk seeking), on the other hand, may increase the probability that individuals explore options and initiate change perceived as upsetting the status quo, which might act as a driver, especially when change is important. For example, when confronted with an uncertain decision-making scenario, risk-seeking individuals will normally take a courageous stand, so as to increase the prospects of getting the best out of the potential opportunities. In the example of Thomas¹¹ we quoted earlier, in addition to his emotional intelligence, he surfaced risk-seeking characteristics as positive drivers to innovate, thus supporting his initiative to engage more people in the creativity process—rather than constrain those involved.

¹⁰ An example from our research (see Sect. 10.1, Example 29).

¹¹ An example from our research (see Sect. 10.1, Example 33).

Research (e.g. Stewart & Roth, 2001) suggests that entrepreneurs exhibit higher risk-seeking behaviors than company managers. Organizations operating in contexts in which entrepreneurial spirit is critical and where it thrives through ideas, products and so on will be more willing to take risks. Individuals in these organizations would be more oriented to change the status quo, be more creative and take risks to attain results that are exceptional. For them, the risk-seeking trait will act as a driver, helping them deal with the challenges posed by the dynamic or ever-changing environment.

Based on the above discussion, we contend that people's tendency in terms of their willingness to take risks or avoid taking risks can act as a driver or a blocker in determining their response to change, that is, how they lead it or deal with it.

6.6 TOLERANCE FOR AMBIGUITY

Tolerance for ambiguity can be regarded as a propensity to see ambiguous circumstances as desirable. On the contrary, intolerance of ambiguity implies that the encounter with ambiguity is threatening (Budner, 1962). High tolerance for ambiguity in leaders has been linked to planning and market orientation; in other words, it facilitates the planning process in challenging and ambiguous situations (Westerberg, Singh, & Häckner, 1997).

An early study by Rydell (1966) showed that tolerance for ambiguity is related to people's willingness to modify their views on issues and how they will endure and deal with novel situations. According to Barringer (2008), individuals with a high tolerance for ambiguity can deal with novel and ambiguous situations with less difficulty in comparison to ones with low tolerance for ambiguity. With the uncertainty, anxiety and stress associated with change, we believe that a low tolerance for ambiguity can act as a blocker in an individual's attempt to change.

Take the case of Laurel,¹² whose objective is to facilitate her team's development and finish projects on time. Laurel, besides being less open to experience, has low tolerance for ambiguity that causes delays in her team's project completion times. Because of her low tolerance for ambiguity, she is less willing to make plans or decisions predicated on partial information or contradictory data. She is not convinced that

¹²An example from our research (see Sect. 10.1, Example 30).

these decisions or plans (based on partial information) will lead to good results and therefore struggles when it comes to enhancing team work and building trust. Low tolerance for ambiguity acts as a blocker in Laurel's case, making it difficult for her to achieve her objective/s in the context. We note that for someone else, in a very different situation, if the behaviors were reflecting high levels of conscientiousness, this could be a driver if the situation was extremely high risk, where the consequences of wrong decisions would be catastrophic.

We believe high tolerance for ambiguity, on the other hand, can operate as a driver, especially in the current, dynamic and disruptive business world, which at times requires leaders to make quick decisions based on incomplete information, as is suggested by Westerberg et al. (1997). Leaders with a high tolerance for ambiguity and confidence that their actions or decisions will lead to successful results are more likely to get better at making accurate predictions on how things function or will function, and will also be good at enhancing and building trust in teams. In the same vein, research by Teoh & Foo (1997) indicates that entrepreneurs with higher tolerance for ambiguity can better deal with stress in their role, resulting in better performance results. All in all, tolerance for ambiguity can act as a major factor; a driver in assisting and dealing with the stress and challenges associated with change, complexity and volatility; or as a blocker, making people uncomfortable with change, and thereby impeding their efforts, and those of others.

6.7 OTHER POTENTIAL AREAS RELATED TO DRIVERS AND BLOCKERS

Throughout this chapter, we examined a wide range of personality traits and dispositional variables and their potential roles as drivers and blockers to add to the dispositional perspective in leadership development. These characteristics included self-esteem, locus of control, self-efficacy, positive and negative affectivity, risk aversion and tolerance for ambiguity. Although we note that some traits tend to be more stable over time, such as the Big Five (Costa & McCrae, 1985), some are more adaptable (Judge et al., 1999), such as positive/negative affectivity.

However, there are other areas related to personality traits and behavioral patterns that we see surfaced as examples and descriptors of drivers and blockers in executives we work with. An example is the trait of "drive" in business leadership, put forth by Kirkpatrick & Locke (1991), which,

according to them, comprises aspects such as *achievement motivation, ambition, energy, tenacity and initiative*, all of which are indicative of elevated effort level (p. 49)—as well as goal (Heilbrun Jr & Friedberg, 1988; Hudson, 2014) and result orientation (Rosenman et al., 1964). It could also include behavioral patterns such as Alpha (Type A) and Beta (Type B) (see e.g. Friedman & Rosenman, 1974; Ludeman & Erlandson, 2006, 2007; Mahajan & Rastogi, 2011; Matthews & Saal, 1978; Ward, Popson, & DiPaolo, 2010).

For the purposes of exploring change drivers and blockers in senior leaders in this book, we have not included these different forms of behavioral patterns as reservoirs, as they may be behavioral reflections more than sources. Nevertheless, some of the authors are undertaking further research on these matters, subject to later publishing. This type of research is also called for in our conclusion.

Also raised in the conclusion is another ongoing area of field research about the question of life experiences in relation to drivers and blockers. This work is intended to look at life experiences and their influence on the sources of drivers and blockers in relation to a specific development objective. For example, we have seen a large number of positive and negative early life experiences (such as parental interactions) emerge as important reasons during the exploration process in relation to sources of drivers and blockers such as self-esteem, motivation and values. This will be clearly seen in the mini cases of Chap. 8 and Sect. 10.8.

Nevertheless, besides the personality traits and dispositional variables covered in the past two chapters, our personal values and motivators (both extrinsic and intrinsic) constitute other important psychological characteristics that can serve as drivers or blockers in an individual's change efforts. We explain these in the next chapter.