

Constructing a questionnaire for the identification / assessment of four types of toxic personality in organization – MAHN

Adriana Carstei, MD
Irina Opincariu, MD
Violeta S. Rotarescu MD, PhD
University of Bucharest

Summary

The multiplicity of abnormal work situations in Romanian organizations (harassment, psychic or sexual abuse, bullying, etc) we noticed or documented in the last years represents the starting point of this questionnaire. Among the most important causes would be certain patterns of behaviour, usually called “difficult personalities” (ex. Lelord & Andre, 1996), sometimes impossible to diagnose in selection process. Analyzing the existing tools for the assessment of personality (MMPI, HDS, DA-307, etc), we made the decision to create an instrument for some of the most toxic types of personality for organizations: the narcissic, the hystrionic, the A type and the sadic (machiavelic or malign).

We commenced with the analysis of the main dimensions, from the literature, and the analysis of specific behaviours. A list of 343 items emerged, with 82 to 94 items per type of personality. The answering mode was a 7-step Lickert scale (1- „it does not apply to me”, 7- „it is exactly me”). We applied the list on 450 employees (age range between 18 and 55) from different organizations, and calculated then the Alpha-Cronbach coefficient for each type of personality (between 0.78 and 0.92).

We also re-applied the list on 47% of the initial sample of employees, to be sure of the stability of the results in the previous session of testing.

We experienced problems in dealing with data for the A type of personality, probably due to different characteristics of this type, compared to the other types (the minimal tendency for manipulating people of A people, for example), which makes necessary the separation of items in two different but related instruments.

In work now are the decreasing of the number of items for every type of personality, toward the 32 most powerful and relevant ones per type, the expanding of the initial sample of subjects, and the validation of the instrument in Romania.

Key words: toxic personality, organization, assessment

Preamble

We all meet “strange” people. Sometimes, they mean nothing else but a curiosity in the environment – we hear that a certain teacher, manager, neighbor, is a difficult or odd person, hard to deal with, etc. The impact on us is minimal. Some other times, these people directly affect and influence our lives, because they tend to dominate, manipulate, behave as bullies and control relationships they have with other people, and we might be part of these situations.

As psychologists and active members of our community, there were many cases and situations when, facing a bully, we had to manage the situation by taking into account the peculiarities of the bully’s personality, in order to anticipate the movements and to react in a better manner, for the bullied and for the organization. We shall present below some cases we faced, that determined us to start this project.

Relevant case studies

Crina, a successful sales manager, was leading teams between four and ten people, depending on her workplace. Although she was well-known on the market for her persuasive skills in finalizing good contracts with big costumers, everybody was wondering why, when she comes to a organization, suddenly her team comes to the spot – team isolation and bad communication, intra-conflictuality and, finally, massive turnover. The exit interview revealed abnormal behavioral interactions between the leader and the subordinates: humiliating and threatening somebody in front of others, setting unrealistic targets for the team, without consulting the team or taking into account the specificity of the market, the period of the year (for example, demanding that people to sell more panties during the summer months), insulting the subordinates for minor reasons (for example, she shouted to a she-colleague calling her a “cow” because she ended a phone conversation with a costumer with “Good bye” and not with “Have a nice day”), raising the level of stress, and the sickness (headaches, stomach aches, accidental minor injuries due to violent manipulation of the work tools, small car accidents). The colleagues at the same level used to say about her “she’s quite aggressive, talking all the time during meeting, she needs others to agree to her opinions, sometimes she raises her voice over all, including the GM. Why doesn’t the GM protest? Because she brings a lot of money to the organization, so she’s valuable. Why isn’t the GM worried about the people that leave organization because of her abusive behavior? Because the market is filled with people willing to work, and to accept everything from a boss, for some money...”. The whole situation escalated when, after a big team success (development of a very important project without incidents and penalties), the GM invited her and her team to congratulate them – and she came alone in the meeting, to take all the congratulations and ... the financial bonus, saying that “the others were not so efficient – look at me, I’m the only one who deserves all these”. We met her in three different organizations (till now!) and the complaints about her behavior were surprisingly similar.

Dorina, a pediatrician doctor, is also middle manager in a hospital, managing one of the three departments of a pediatric hospital clinic. Compared to the previous situation, things are a bit different. First of all, we speak about a public institution, not a private company, so the turnover is significantly lower (this aspect is a specific trait for Romanian public institutions). This means that, when someone behaves abusively to

others, the outcome for the bullied will go directly to behavioral “adjustment” to the situation, and not to turnover. Secondly, due to the public managerial position, she will never be assessed for this aspect, but for professional level of knowledge. So that, if someone comes into such a team and notices difficulties in communication, fear, conflictuality, poor performances and efficacy, tiredness, absent-minded (even resigned) people, shouted discussions from managerial office and nurses whisperingly complaining about being forced to swallow cigarettes in the smoking area, because Dorina doesn’t like smokers and punishes them whenever she can... then, that someone cannot, officially, put the blame on the managerial behavior because nobody cares about this managerial aspect into a public institution. Let’s add some other information, that better characterizes our lady: she reached the highest academic level, professor in the Medical School, under the suspicion of intellectual theft (she begged two colleagues to “give” her their research, for the academic title – and nobody checked the suspicions after that); her most common activity in the department is to criticize, but she leaves all discussions when case studies (ill children) are analysed. Unfortunately, we met similar behavior in too many public institutions – so many, that we dare to say it’s a specific trait, and it could be one of the factors that determines the migration of the people to private sector or abroad.

Constantin, the manager of a small company in Buzau (15 employers), is famous all around the community for his behavior. Even though people around him agree he is a trustful, and even a kind person, his aggressive and disruptive behavior in certain situations raises fear among them, so that only the “brave” ones dared to confront him. His main “themes” were linked both to the quantity and the quality of work: pace of activity, reaching dead-lines, quality of results and of details, speed of finding new customers, new contracts, etc. If the targets are not met, people could expect anything from him, including physical punishment.

Emil, a teacher in a public high school, was characterized by one of his students as “...strange; he always is right in anything he says, emphatically, no one is allowed to interrupt him during the class; if a student contradicts him, next time he spends five minutes or more to prove to that student how stupid his or her opinions are, in the scientific context; even more, in each group of students he enjoys having a sort of a third ear, a student that reports what happens in that group during the classes, spreads rumors and opinions about other teachers over colleagues, etc – now, my colleagues realize all these and avoid the spies”. Nobody knows anything clear about his private life, but he is complaining all the time. His great pleasure is to talk to older she-teachers and to impress them with sad stories – and, while they are impressed till cry, he looks to them, very satisfied. Usually, around him there are two groups – supporters and opponents, fighting one to each other. The atmosphere in the group of teachers has never been relaxed since he was appointed in this workplace.

The project

This five-year project, in which we attempt to build a screening questionnaire on four major types of personality patterns, is ending the second year of activity.

The reasons for the frequency of this types of behaviors are diverse: cultural and historical (obedience based on fear, due to political regime), social (need for social power and recognition, as fast as possible), local and personal (type of personality, specific

conditions in personal development) and organizational (type of organization, the climate inside, etc).

The steps of the project

The steps (till now) were: documentation, portraiting typical patterns (“frames”), underlining behaviors, formulating items (as many as possible for each type of frame), designing the questionnaire, sampling and testing, getting statistical analysis, designing the second (shorter) version of the questionnaire.

As mentioned before, there is a noticeable number of odd situations in the workplace in Romania (according to some data, about 50% of Romanian managers who were tested for the “dark side” of their personality have a strong tendency of being bold/narcissic, skeptical/suspicious and diligent, above the international norms in the area, *courtesy of Hart Int.*), and that was the reason why we started to construct the questionnaire called MAHN. Its name comes from M (malign), A (from A type of personality), H (histrionic) and N (narcissic type), as conventional denominations for the general frames we had in mind. Working with the literature and confronting the cases convinced us that these frames likely are the most toxic and bullying types in organizations.

Let’s follow now the main path of the project.

Documentation

Documentation included different types of sources. As mentioned above, the main starting point was our own diverse experience, both professional and extra-professional. As professionals (external or internal consultants for organizations), we had to deal with a lot of organizational dysfunctions: conflictuality, unproductive climate, communication distortions, etc. Many times results conducted toward a specific person or a group of people, considered “guilty” for the situation. Analyzing further, all information converged toward a person or a group of people, having a dominating and intimidating behavior toward others.

Portraiting the patterns (“filling in” the frames)

The results of the previous step were put into a set of “frames”, or “portraits”, combining all resources available: direct or indirect experiences, literature, experiences shared by other professionals during scientific events, etc.

The most probable patterns considered to occur in organizational practice, and also with a high “toxicity” for the people inside, and for organizations, were considered the equivalent of the narcissic, the histrionic, the sadic and the A type. At a first glance, the A type is very different from the others, mainly because it lacks the manipulative “trait”. Still, strong tendency for aggressive behavior (both verbally and behaviorally) makes it a “good” choice for the assessment tool.

Typical behaviors

The frames conducted us to two types of behaviors, for each frame: the most typical ones (confirmed by our experiences, agreed by all the team, found in the

literature) and the accidental ones (found in some cases, not in others, not all team agreed on their importance, not all authors mentioned them).

Items

One of the most difficult jobs we had during the first part of the project was to create items that “beat” the manipulative tendency of three out of four main frames we took into account. The whole idea, in our opinion, was to use a soft, non-blaming, non-judging way of saying unpleasant or strange things about typical behaviors we wanted to assess. For example, instead of formulating “I play with people’s feelings”, we preferred “I feel amused to play with people’s feelings” / “Ma amuza sa ma joc cu sentimentele celorlalti” (item 184, “sadic” frame) or, instead of “Nobody can read anything on my face” the item “I feel amused that nobody could read anything on my face” / “Ma amuza ca ceilalti nu-mi citesc nimic pe fata” (item 102, “sadic” frame).

There were behaviors when this manipulative trait was impossible to deal with in this way. Our solution was to build overt items and to reverse the score in statistical analysis (for example, the item “You have to proceed just when it’s morally justified” “Trebuie sa actionezi doar cand este just din punct de vedere moral”, item 6, is an item reversely quoted).

The Lickert scale was specially designed for these three frames. It consists of seven degrees, from negation (“it is not about me”/ “it doesn’t refer to me”) to affirmation (“it is about me”, “it is me”), having the same idea in mind, namely the acceptability and the sincerity of the answers from the targeted subjects.

In case of the fourth frame, our efforts were differently oriented, specifically toward the length of the items. We know that the speed the A type people move ahead and their limited patience make them appreciate short, clear and straightforward items: “I feel always under pressure” / “Ma simt tot timpul sub presiune”, “I am always in a hurry” / “Ma grabesc mereu”, etc. No reverse formulation of the items was necessary.

The Lickert scale was the same as for the other frames, all frames being mixed in a 343-item questionnaire.

Designing questionnaire

The “best” items of all frames (from 82 to 94 items per frame), in our opinion, were randomly mixed and made up the tool. The instructions requested the subjects to answer the questions according to their usual life style, and to take into account the usual behavior they have independent of the activity (work, home, leisure, etc) – see Annex 1.

The questionnaire was designed for active population ageing between 18 and 65 yo (employer/ex-employer, employee/ex-employee). The answers were individual and anonymous. For research reasons, subjects were asked to fill in the last four digits of their personal insurance number, to allow the comparison between data in case of re-testing, without identifying them.

Sampling and testing

Before the first session, 20 graduate students in psychology were tested, in order to get preliminary suggestions about the instrument (items, Lickert scale, instructions, etc). A number of 11 suggestions were taken into account and the questionnaire was

changed according to them. All ideas regarded the formal structure of the questionnaire, not its content.

The first session of testing took place in Bucharest and Buzau. People from 10 medium and large private companies were tested (300 subjects), altogether with 150 people from 16 public institutions, covering all organizational levels (executive level / middle level / top level). The gender was uneven distributed between subjects (283 females to 167 males).

Getting statistical data

Data were collected and analyzed using SPSS version 13.0. Statistical analysis (regression analysis) was used in order to reveal the clusters of items for each frame, the power of alpha coefficient, the level of overlapping, or the oppositions between the clusters. The quantity of data is huge and, as an example, we shall present only a table from malign type analysis, showing the way the items grouped to form 5 main descriptive factors for this personality frame:

Correlation matrix					Covariance matrix						
Component	1	2	3	4	5	Component	1	2	3	4	5
1	1,000	,438	,524	,267	,257	1	2,240	1,761	3,065	1,540	2,180
2	,438	1,000	,433	,359	,188	2	1,761	1,921	2,338	1,513	2,782
3	,524	,433	1,000	,281	,341	3	3,065	2,338	4,172	2,188	3,612
4	,267	,359	,281	1,000	,219	4	1,540	1,513	2,188	2,389	2,533
5	,257	,188	,341	,219	1,000	5	2,180	2,782	3,612	2,533	4,684

Factorial analysis – the 5 factors regarding the malign type, called as follows: 1. Sufficiency; 2. Moral Inconsistency; 3. Machiavellic Sadism; 4. Emotional Vacuum; 5. Improbability.

The second version of the questionnaire

After the first version of the questionnaire, the most powerful items emerged, forming the core of the instrument. These items (with an alpha coefficient higher than .72) were selected for the second version of the questionnaire.

The second version of MAHN is planned to be a 132-item instrument, 3+1 investigated frames – which means separation between A frame and the rest of three frames. This means also a separation between Lickert scales, the scale for A type being shorter and more direct (due to specific characteristic of people under this description).

What's next

Our next concerns are very much linked to the possibility of expanding the sample of subjects (other Romanian regions, more professions, more male subjects, in order to equalize the representativity, etc) toward a national and very representative sample of adult subjects, for the second version of the instrument.

Conclusions

Detecting abusive behaviors is a very important job in the activity of an organization. They become a potential risk for the success and the safety of the other employers, for the organization itself. The lack of identification of malign types with common self-administered clinical tools raises the idea of a specific screening instrument,

to be applied in recruitment and selection, but also is a process that needs time and significant financial resources.

As we mentioned, we started the project and we are very determined to continue it, no matter what.

Bibliography

To be added for the e-book

INVENTARUL MANH (prima pagina)

Mai jos veti gasi o lista de enunțuri cu privire la diverse stări de viață. Va rugăm să bifați pe scala alăturată fiecare enunț, în dreptul poziției care vi se pare mai apropiată de stăutul dvs. Puteți lua în calcul și gradurile intermediare ale scării. Raspunsurile dvs. sunt confidentiale și anonime, codul test-reeșt fiind necesar doar pentru scopuri de cercetare.

Varsta:	Sex:	F M	Intreprinzator privat (in prezent sau in trecut):	Angajat/a (in prezent sau trecut):		Cod test-reeșt:
				Da Nu	Da Nu	
001	Impresia pe care o faci e hotaratoare pentru a-i convinge pe ceilalti ca esti valoros/ valoroasa pentru ei.			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	nu e asa nu prea catt asa asa este
002	Ma duc cu chief la serviciu sau la cursuri numai daca imahnesc acolo persoana de care sunt atras/ a.			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	nu e asa nu prea catt asa asa este
003	Imi place sa atrag atentia in orice mod.			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	nu e asa nu prea catt asa asa este
004	Imi doresc ca ceilalti sa uite la mine cu invidie cumt rad de bucurie.			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	nu e asa nu prea catt asa asa este
005	Sentimentele ii fac pe oamnti vulnerabili.			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	nu e asa nu prea catt asa asa este
006	Imi place sa mingalesc un lucru pana ia forma potrivita.			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	nu e asa nu prea catt asa asa este
007	Cei mai importanti lucruri pentru mine e sa am multi bani.			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	nu e asa nu prea catt asa asa este
008	Nu intarzi niciodata la intlniri.			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	nu e asa nu prea catt asa asa este
009	E pierdere de vreme sa ma gandesc la ce ramane dupa mine.			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	nu e asa nu prea catt asa asa este
010	Regret ca mi-a pasat prea mult de ceilalti si am testt in pierdere.			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	nu e asa nu prea catt asa asa este
011	Mi se intampla sa-mi dau seama ca-mi scarsnesc dintii sau imi strang punnii.			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	nu e asa nu prea catt asa asa este
012	Nu-mi este indiferent ce va ramane in urma mea.			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	nu e asa nu prea catt asa asa este
013	Intotdeauna imi pun singur termene limita.			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	nu e asa nu prea catt asa asa este
014	Pot plange cand vreau.			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	nu e asa nu prea catt asa asa este
015	Tin evidenta automat in termeni numerici la ceea ce fac : am parcurs atatia kilometri, am scris atatea scisorii...			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	nu e asa nu prea catt asa asa este
016	Ma distreaza sa-i impresionez pe ceilalti.			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	nu e asa nu prea catt asa asa este
017	Imi place sa ma pun in roluri sau situatii insoșite.			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	nu e asa nu prea catt asa asa este
018	Mi se intampla deseori sa ma trezesc dis-de-dimnata sau in miezul nopții gandrindu-ma la ce am de facut tiltenor.			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	nu e asa nu prea catt asa asa este
019	Ma detanjeza sa execut sarcini meticuloase.			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	nu e asa nu prea catt asa asa este