
House Angels and Work Devils: Authenticity at Work

By Kate Carruthers

We have all done it - putting on the special telephone answering voice as we pick up the phone. In our daily life, we use many different personas. This is not a bad thing as this helps us to navigate our way through daily interactions. But there is a phenomenon occurring in offices all over the world that is disturbing.

My mother used to call me a "street angel and a house devil" because I often behaved well in public but was a tearaway at home. There are many people in workplaces today who are acting in the opposite way. That is they are "house angels and *work devils*". These individuals may be known to their families and friends as charming and delightful people. However, to those unlucky enough to cross their path in the workplace the meeting is with a bully, tyrant, and emotional saboteur.

A friend recently gave me a book to read on psychopaths in the workplace (Clarke, 2005 *Working with Monsters*). Based upon that book and other reading it does not seem as though these *work devils* are psychopaths in the classic form. But having seen the damage done by these *work devils*, there must surely be some kind of psychopathology behind such dreadful behaviour and bad treatment of other people? But evidence of several cases where I have known the *work devil* on a social basis showed clearly that these people are quite charming in a social context. Even in work based social contexts, such as lunches or dinners, the *work devil* can display charm and be a pleasant person to interact with. But as soon as they are back in the office setting, the *work devil* reappears.

It is important to note that, while *work devil* behaviour can be displayed at any level within an organisation, it is most generally displayed amongst managers and supervisors.

The *work devil* behaviours that I have seen displayed in workplaces include (but are not limited to):

- Walking past every staff member and not greeting them or acknowledging them in any way
- Screaming at an individual about a problem that they had nothing to do with while in an open office
- Gossiping about staff to other managers to avoid losing them to another internal role
- yelling at a staff member in a large meeting that they were stupid
- lying to staff and then pretending they did not lie
- Setting impossible targets for staff to ensure that they cannot meet achieve a bonus
- Micromangement, micromangement, micromangement, micromangement, micromangement, micromangement, micromangement,
- Isolating individuals from information they need to do their job, not inviting them to important meetings
- going through a staff member's personal possessions
- doing something wrong then pretending it was one of their staff who did it

What is difficult to encapsulate in a bullet point is the way that a *work devil* can chip away at your sanity and self esteem on a daily basis. Leaving you feeling stupid and

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ineffectual. There is good stress and bad stress at work. The feeling you get from a *work devil* is definitely bad stress (2002, Lenson, *Good Stress, Bad Stress*).

The most frightening issue with many of the behaviours listed above is that they are often public displays, yet rarely does any person in authority take action to stop the behaviour. Rarely have I seen a senior manager take the *work devil* aside and counsel them. Never have I seen a *work devil* fired due to their continued bad behaviour. Often in spite of high levels of staff turnover in their department and clear suffering of stress by their staff the *work devil* is allowed to continue their reign of terror.

What makes the *work devil* think that it is acceptable to act in horrible ways at work? Why do they act that way at work and not at home? Is it because at home nobody would put up with that kind of behaviour? Does this mean that the *work devil* is being authentic in one place and not in the other? Which place is the one where they are being authentically themselves - home or work? What would their families and friends think if they could see the *work devil* in action? An interesting thing to note is that some of the most brutal commandants of the Nazi concentration camps (e.g. Rudolf Hoess <http://www.deathcamps.info/Letters/Hoess.htm>) also displayed this *work devil* pattern. They were known to their families as kind and gentle people, noted for their kindness to animals, but displayed dreadful inhumanity and cruelty in the workplace.

Companies and the Work Devil Phenomenon

What does this *work devil* phenomenon tell us about the modern workplace? It tells us that in spite of the rhetoric about caring for staff, the reality is that as long a manager is seen as delivering results it does not matter what damage is done to the human beings involved in the process.

If the well being of staff members were important to companies then *work devil* behaviour by managers would be completely unacceptable. Instead, the damaging behaviour is often rewarded (as long as it is accompanied by good financial results) and results in disempowering and discouraging those suffering under the reign of terror. Sometimes, when a staff member tries to speak out about the *work devil's* behaviour, it is made clear that they should just keep quiet and not rock the boat. This has happened to colleagues and to me over the years. During these encounters with other managers (either senior managers to the *work devil* or human resources managers), it becomes clear that these people are afraid of confronting the bad behaviour of the *work devil*. It would be very interesting to know if this fear is simply a fear of confrontation or if they too are terrified of the *work devil*?

Another interesting question - Is there something inherent in the way workplaces are organised that makes it easier or possible for people to display *work devil* behaviours? Obviously, the scale of the bad behaviour is not the same as in the concentration camps, but the pattern is similar. In the *work devil* phenomenon individuals demonstrate a disconnect between their private and public behavioural personas. Is the connecting emotion between the two (i.e. workplaces and concentration camps) the emotion of fear?

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Is fear what drives a person to disconnect from the private mode of being - which is kind and loving - to display a special work mode of being?

What Can Be Done About a Work Devil?

If you work for a *work devil* then there is a decision to be made. Either you stay and put up with the behaviour and consequent feelings of stress, or leave and take the chance that you will not be unlucky two times in a row.

If you are a manager, the best thing that you can do is to stop the behaviour at inception. As soon as you see or hear of any of your team members displaying *work devil* behaviours counsel them. Make the ground rules for behaviour in your team clear to everyone. Usually upon taking over a new team I hold an introductory meeting - laying out the ground rules - and these usually include statements like:

"I do not care what you think about each other or how you feel about each other. We are here to do a job. In this team, we treat each other with courtesy. We treat our colleagues with courtesy (even if you happen to hate one of them). We always treat our customers with courtesy as well. We do this because we are professionals and we act like it. We are all on the same team and it is important that we act like it. Our team will do well if we all work together. Together we can achieve more together than individually - that's why we build teams."

Of course, if this is just rhetoric, the staff see right through it very quickly and become cynical. If you model the behaviour and ensure that all other management staff model the behaviour then the rest of the staff will follow on. However, if you allow even one manager to get away with not modeling the behaviours, then you lose the trust of the staff, look insincere AND you become complicit in the *work devil's* bad behaviour. This is a moral issue for managers. We must ask ourselves if we are willing to participate in this, after all as the English philosopher Edmund Burke said, 'The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.'

It is possible to deliver good results for your organisation **and** to treat the people that deliver those results as human beings. In fact, it is easier to sustain good results if there is lower staff turnover and staff are not anxious or stressed.

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Appendix - Work Devils in Comedy & Drama

The following examples are an entertaining way to have a look at what not to do:

- David Brent - the boss in *The Office* (BBC)
- Gordon Gecko - *Wall Street* (Oliver Stone 1986)
- Any boss in Dilbert - <http://www.dilbert.com/>
- Franklin M. Hart Jr. - the boss in *Nine To Five* (Colin Higgins 1980)
- Katharine Parker - the boss in *Working Girl* (Mike Nichols, 1988)