

## **The Office Politics: Diplomatic Leadership, Bold Bullies, and the Workplace Drama Queen**

**Lemar Murray Nolan**  
Western Governors University  
4001 S 700 E #700  
Salt Lake City, UT 84107  
United States of America

### **Abstract**

*Difficult workplace personalities can destroy office morale, rupture productivity, and lead to turnover. Managers often struggle to discern best practices, while also striving to maintain a balanced work environment. This conceptual essay is meant to offer perspective on dealing with the toxic personalities such as the Office Drama Queen (ODQ). Despite the feminine term, for the purpose of this essay, this personality is such regardless of gender, race, or other demographic signifier. This personality may be a bully, but typically operating from some personal trauma or insecurity that compromises office function. Unfortunately, many managers are not in a position to cope with such personalities. Further, research suggests that involving human resources only escalates the problem. Therefore, this essay will review the damage toxic personalities bring to a work unit, offer some options a manager can use and conclude with strategies on how to potentially mitigate the problem.*

**Keywords:** workplace bullying, employee disengagement, leadership, toxic employees

### **Introduction**

In the work-a-day life, many professionals have experienced this personality: bossy, emotional, draining, apparently hardworking, but yet typically behind schedule. They are often the office “Chicken Little” professing that the sky is falling. . . again. At first, fellow co-workers or managers initially fall short of understanding this drain of energy that accompanies working with this person. Perhaps staff members find themselves writing emails to this person instead of dropping by the office or picking up the phone to interact with him or her. After time, it might dawn on the average worker that this co- worker’s muted hysterics and steady complaining never cease. After months or even years, reality is confirmed; we have a drama queen in our midst. While this colloquial term has a negative gendered connotation; in truth, the Office Drama Queen (ODQ) comes in all shapes and sizes, races, ages, and both genders.

### **Background**

Dealing with toxic individuals at work is critical given that we spend more time with people at work than our spouses, friends, loved ones, or even pets. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reflects that adults spend 8.8 hours working, 7.8 hours sleeping and 2.6 hours in leisure (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). However recent studies report that 37% Americans face workplace bullying, with the frequency of workplace bullying more extensive in higher education (Hollis, 2016). Dealing with bullies, drama queens, and other toxic personalities on the job can have an adverse impact on employees’ health leading to feelings of anxiety, stress, guilt panic and depression (Workplace Bullying Institute, 2015).

However, despite the damage to employees’ health and work productivity, toxic personalities such as bullies and drama queens can typically rule over their staff, holding them emotionally hostage. The human resources department, as reported by Hampton (2016) and Hollis (2016a) typically does nothing or makes the situations worse: “... in less than 2% of cases is HR effective in stopping harassing behavior” (p. 3). The problem of dealing with toxic personalities festers and during the great recession had a 30% increase.

The economy has an impact on hiring practices and employee behavior (Hollis, 2015). When staff is reduced to contingent and part-time workers, there is more disruption and less service. In turn, there is more opportunity for drama at work. Researchers speculate that the threat of job loss and economic instability exasperated the problem of bullies and toxic personalities on the job (Weber, Powell, & KRC Research, 2013).

### ***Traits of the Drama Queen***

Various research studies reflect on the traits of toxic bosses, organizational bullies, and the managerial incompetents who dot the countryside of leadership analysis (Branch, Ramsay, & Barker, 2013; Glasø & Notelaers, 2012; Hollis, 2016; Hollis, 2016c). However, such leadership figures were once dysfunctional underlings. As leaders, their organizational dysfunction was apparently rewarded or overlooked with career advancement. They develop from entry level and middle management before emerging as department head. Similar to office bullies, the ODQ is carrying some intrinsic hurt from his or her professional life or personal life that drives the need to be the constant center of attention (Harvey et al., 2007; Walserde Lara, 2016). While some office mates enjoy a quiet afternoon to catch up on looming projects, or a hushed moment to regroup after a meeting, the ODQ seeks reinforcement, positive or negative, to soothe his or her constant desire for attention. The ODQs often lack the emotional intelligence to self reflect on their own behavior and how they engage coworkers with negativity or self-aggrandizing praise. This difficult personality does not manage his or her feelings well which leads to a lack consideration for what others are thinking or feelings (Lubit, 2004, p. 1). Often the root of this behavior stems from personal fear, insecurity, and cluelessness. At times the ODQ possesses a narcissistic streak that is arrogant, absent of empathy, and exploits others without remorse. Further, this narcissism is legendary in the ODQ's own mind, they become preoccupied with his or her own accomplishments, even if such successes were gained in collaboration with organizational peers (Lubit, 2004).

Many ODQs have a solid work ethic; they take pride in comparing themselves, if even in their own minds, to others who apparently do not show the commitment to work and productivity that they project in their workspace. Despite a solid work ethic, this insecure personality suffers from low self-esteem. Instead of engaging in a vocational meta-cognition, and thinking about how to sincerely improve on their own shortcomings, ODQs mask their insecurities in the face of their organizations and continue to posture as the endlessly devoted career martyr. Unfortunately, this often incessant drive to establish themselves as the indispensable staffers, can lead to the creation of a toxic aura which fellow colleagues avoid and resent. Further, their fragile ego and inflated commitment can be couched in a presumed moral code about the ODQ doing their best for the organization, the college or the students. Ironically, such service is often lacking in collaboration and coalition building. As much as they present their actions and continuous bickering as for the betterment of others; in truth, such behavior is similar to their other behaviors that attempt to establish the ODQ as the indispensable person in their respective units.

The Office Drama Queen as described above has many similarities to the toxic narcissistic and histrionic personalities clinically discussed by Cavaiola and Lavender (2000). Such figures can have personality disorders that impede their ability to have the emotional intelligence in their interactions with co-workers (p. 28). They are also unable to develop insight or empathy for colleagues enduring complex work situations. Narcissistic personalities have a "grandiose sense of self-importance . . . a [preoccupation] with success, power, and beauty . . . require excessive admiration . . . has a sense of entitlement and [exploits others] to achieve is or her own ends" (p. 34). The Office Drama Queen emerging from narcissistic tendencies can be particularly frustrating. As they "lack any sense of humility; they are often great at selling themselves to others, especially to bosses..." Though colleagues might try to work closely with this personality, "good deeds will seem threatening; [they] will be envious and jealous of [co-workers'] good work." (p. 41). Further, narcissists and many bullies will not acknowledge co-workers' achievements that are a product of their own insecurity. Office Drama Queens who have histrionic tendencies embody the essential dramatic behaviors to draw attention to themselves through "self-dramatization, theatricality, and exaggerated expression of emotion" (Cavaiola & Lavender, 2000). They have a "pervasive pattern of excessive emotionality. They are uncomfortable in situations [where they are not] the center of attention. Their emotions shift rapidly; they use 'physical appearance to draw attention. . . [and] consider relationships to be more intimate than they actually are. . ." (p. 53). With the histrionic personality, *everything* is a crisis (p. 59). Whether the ODQ is a true narcissist, essential histrionic or complex blend of the two personality types, coworkers will struggle to maintain their own boundaries in the face of these dysfunctions.

Staff members with any type of personality disorders are “so caught up and consumed in [their] own agenda, that [they] do not focus on what those around [them] are experiencing” (p. 24). Consequently, these emotionally draining colleagues can repel coworkers. Managers are often reluctant to attempt correction that can lead unpleasant and exhaustive conflicts with the ODQs. In turn, the organization can be left to enjoy the ODQs productivity, which serves to sooth their own insecurities; yet the cost of enduring such ODQs compromise the productivity other fellow coworkers constantly struggling devising methods to minimize the stress in working with these insensitive personalities.

### ***Impact of Drama on Colleagues***

The impact of the ODQ on the office polarizes colleagues. Most people do not come to work to joust daily. As human nature seeks the path of least resistance, employees may initially give in to requests for extra attention or support from the ODQ. Once saturated by the ODQ’s constant need for attention, the same staff starts to avoid the ODQ; some staff applies for transfer or simply avoids this personality (Bryne, 2015; Lovell & Lee, 2011). The ODQ can have a negative impact on relationships across campus. While units might try to build coalitions for new programs and procedures, a Drama Queen with caustic remarks can reverse months of positive progress. Frost (2000) found that incivility has a negative impact on staff performance. In a study of 775 employees, “more than ¼ acknowledge that they wasted work time trying to avoid the instigator . . . they reworked former paths to avoid hallway encounters” (p. 52). Many reported that after they were the targets of an uncivil outburst, they stopped their voluntary efforts, stopped offering assistances to newcomers, and stopped committee work. Consistent with employee disengagement theories, employee behavior will avoid the toxic person and reserve their emotional energy in the hostile work environment (Bryne, 2015). The avoidance, emotional rumination and psychological distraction caused by bullies and drama queens can cost the organization thousands of dollars. (Hollis, 2016). Employees withdraw from toxic environments and grow apathetic to toxic people. When the drama and toxicity lead to abuse and insults, employees on average disengage from the work environment for 4.1 hours (Hollis, 2016). This time tabulated over a year is over five weeks’ time annually that an employee is coping with toxic people instead of attending to the business of the organization. Nonetheless, toxic people and bullies are allowed to fester and destroy office morale.

For example, in higher education, often academic affairs collaborates with student affairs and residential life. In one particular case, the vice president of student affairs was working closely with the vice president of academic affairs to review enrollment and placement services for their college. Pieces of each procedure are incorporated within the respective units. These two divisions worked through a once contentious environment to lay new groundwork for serving students. Once the two vice presidents devised a plan, which required compromise on the part of staff in each division, each vice president needed to inform their respective staff of the newly devised procedures and the compromises involved in forging these new relationships. Upon hearing the news, the ODQ in student affairs launched a broadcast email to both student affairs and academic affairs exclaiming his excitement for the new procedure and how it closely matched his original idea. Needless to say, the academic affairs people were offended to receive this veiled directive from the ODQ, while student affairs staff was embarrassed by the premature email. The student affairs vice president was left in a position of smoothing over the ruffled feathers of his academic affairs colleagues. After months of careful planning and active listening, one of the student affairs own staff sends a harsh email to all involved, jeopardizing the good relations developed by the vice president of student affairs and academic affairs. In short, in an effort confirm his self-ordained moral code in the face of both academic affairs and student affairs divisions; the ODQ has jeopardized relationships between the two divisions by being inappropriately conspicuous.

A second example includes the office manager of the secretarial pool. She was new to her position in June and eager to gain acceptance. In the mornings of the slow summer months, the ODQ would speak with her boss, the assistant dean, clerks, and other secretaries about her abusive mother, passive father, and absentee brother. In her anxiety, she divulged information about her divorce and her own children. This ODQ, however, was an excellent worker. Once she alleviated herself through this daily 45-minute catharsis, she would return to her desk to continue projects in her well-decorated and pristine office. This pattern repeated itself for three months, until the open of school in September. The soft time of 45 minutes evaporated quickly from peoples’ schedules and they tended to students and occasional parents. The ODQ was no longer the center of attention. At first she sulked and complained that no one trained her, though she had been completing tasks successfully since her third week on the job.

She began barking at students who called; the ODQ donned an occasional crocodile tear in an attempt to gain time on people's schedules to recount the events of her miserable evening. After four weeks in the busy fall semester, the ODQ filed a grievance against her boss, the assistant dean. The terms of the grievance were vague and unsubstantiated. In fact, the grievance was eventually deemed petty and dismissed. However, the ODQ saw it as an accomplishment. During the six weeks it took to file the grievance, the staff was preoccupied with reviewing working procedures and policies to resolve the petty grievance. The ODQ had a significant impact on her boss's time and gained the deliberate attention of all involved in the process, despite the fact that the grievance was dismissed. The college spent a significant time quelling the charges made in the grievance. The secretaries remained ill at ease for the semester; more staff called out sick, or scheduled meetings on other parts of campus. While no one was fired, and no disciplinary file was created as a result of the grievance, the college lost valuable productivity in working with students, developing retention programs, building relationship with faculty across campus, as the college was preoccupied with settling this grievance. In both cases, the ODQ did not cause tangible damage. No one lost their jobs; students were not put in harms' way. In fact, in both cases, the ODQ continues to work diligently and make significant strides in his or her own workload. However, the antics of the ODQ in both cases developed ill feelings amongst professional staff trying to establish boundaries for themselves in the face of an emotionally needy colleague. While the ODQ might indeed be a smart, diligent, and dedicated employee; his or her need for attention can impede progress for the organization.

### ***Recommendations***

Whether the ODQ is narcissistic, driven by histrionics or a tragic mix of these dysfunctions, co-workers and managers can consider two schools of thought in interacting with the Office Drama Queen. An altruistic approach considers how to fix and support the ODQ. Intrinsicly, the ODQ is a troubled and insecure figure that masks such insecurities with drama, productivity and a constant drive for affirmation. Fellow staffers should "avoid getting on the emotional roller coaster. Keep a sense of calm and composure to avoid getting hooked into their crises" (Cavaiola & Lavender, 2000). Fire begets fire with this insecure personality. Meeting them with the same fervor or hostility can result in them doubling their efforts to be appreciated and understood, no matter how misguided their methods are. Such ODQs might even break into tears in an attempt to resolve a perceived threat to colleagues uncovering how they really feel about themselves.

### ***Option #1***

Frost (2004) indicates that managers and coworkers can empathize and embrace the toxic employee. He provides insight on how to be "toxic handler" and offers suggestions on how to proceed in trying to help. "Handlers get hooked on other people's pain when they get over involved in the emotional and feelings of those they're helping" (p. 117). As managers and bosses are typically not trained psychologists, they need to structure a healthy self while they deal with the toxic personalities at work. As Frost (2004) acknowledges handling pain is not in the job description, yet toxic handlers can make themselves more resilient by taking care of themselves mentally, physically, and spiritually. Exercise, a healthy diet, and mediation can help toxic handlers stay balanced in the wake of ODQs who will decidedly or inadvertently siphon the emotional energy from someone trying to support them through their anxieties. Nonetheless, Frost reminds workers that leaders can have a positive impact on the situation when they act with "professional intimacy," showing care and concern without clouding their judgment by over-identifying with the sufferer (Frost, 2004, para. 1). After attempting to assist ODQs through their trauma filled issues, a toxic handler should be willing to also be insightful about progress. Investing in the ODQs can be like pouring good intentions into an emotional abyss. Therefore, prudence should guide the idea that all ills are not treatable. Throughout the ordeal of support toxic personalities, managers and co-workers still need to set and keep boundaries. "NO" is a viable answer when entitled personalities asked for excessive favors or privileges that are outside the scope of office policy or procedure.

### ***Option #2***

As previously stated, most managers and coworkers do not have the professional training to engage the personality disorders which may be at the root of the ODQs' behaviors. Whether the ODQ is indeed a staffer with a personality disorder, or simply an insecure personality with a constant drive to be at the center of attention, the fact remains that managers and coworkers who engage this personality can find themselves frustrated, hurt, and circulating their own resumes.

These types of self-serving personalities “are notorious for their rigidity and unwillingness to change” (Cavaiola & Lavender, 2000, p.44). Coworkers and managers should alert their own supervisors to the issues around the ODQ. As the office might already be desensitized to hysterics and drama filled antics, discussions regarding the ODQ should be steeped in specific instances, data, examples, and presented with objectivity. Just as in option #1, any one dealing with the ODQ should be prepared to set boundaries. The ODQ’s constant need for any kind of attention can be at the least distracting. In the most extreme cases, the ODQ is hurtful and damaging to coworkers and the organization. In fact, “this problem can function like a hidden cancer, slowly and persistently sucking the life out of a productive and viable organization by creating inefficient managements, sexual harassment, excessive litigation, escalating expenses and job related stress” (p. 7).

The concepts in dealing with the ODQ emerge from concepts psychological and organizational dynamics. Various literatures loosely refer to the ideas that can make the composite of the ODQ; yet psychological analysis brings clinical insight to histrionic and narcissistic workplace personalities. At the end of another stressful day with an ODQ, the common denominator still remains. The Office Drama Queen personality is draining and potentially destructive to those around them. A second common denominator in conversations addressing destructive workplace personalities is the need for the ODQs’ managers and coworkers to engage in their own emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence includes a personal competence and self-awareness of feelings, strengths and weaknesses. Emotional intelligence simultaneously includes social competencies that employ empathy and insights in managing relationships. Such skills include an appropriate sense of humor, the ability to collaborate and diplomacy (Lubit, 2004).

### ***Option #3***

Hollis (2016c) writes that the ombuds can serve as an impartial third party to mitigate workplace conflict. Ombuds are trained to listen to all sides and consider solutions confidentially. While often either party might think the ombuds will take action, the impartial ombuds can collect data and discretely report such trends to the organization. While the ombuds may not take action explicitly, the ombuds can be an appropriate and confidential source to dispense insight regarding a tough workplace situation.

However, those who visit an ombuds office should know the ombuds can listen and provide insight. The ombuds does not take action or intervene for either party in a grievance. Nor is reporting to the ombuds qualify as putting an organization on notice for harassment, discrimination or other deleterious conditions caused by the ODQ.

### ***Conclusion***

At times, managers and supervisors have challenges in working with difficult and recalcitrant colleagues. However, the tools to deal with such often lie in the simple processes already available to supervisors. The employee code of conduct and mission statement are formal documents which can help mitigate the problem. Such documents can be applied to everyone’s evaluation process objectively such giving bullies and drama queen’s fair notice on how their behavior has a negative impact on the office. Assigning collaborative projects in which fair treatment of all team members is another strategy to draw out a bully. The project may suffer as teammates try to exit the team, the lacking productivity of the team can be a measurable outcome and objective benchmark in an evaluation process.

Difficult work personalities can destroy the environment for the manager and workers. People mentally disengage from hostile and dysfunctional environments. Many managers report that they are not trained to deal with bullies and other difficult office personalities. However, without intervention, these Office Drama Queens (ODQs), bold bullies, and other curmudgeon personalities only gain power in their desire for power and coercion. While one might find it troublesome, leaders need to find methods to minimize the problem early. Otherwise, without a cultural shift, all involved, will feel eventually feel trapped at work and retreat to apathy or high turnover rates (Bliss, 2012) as a psychological defense to the problem

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