



**executive coach**

by Karlin Sloan



# The bad apple

Problem employees and how to deal with them.

THOSE OF US WHO ENJOYED THE GUILTY PLEASURE of Donald Trump’s latest escapades in *The Apprentice* all recognize the phenomenon of the “bad apple.” Did you see some of that backstabbing commentary? Some of those folks wouldn’t know how to play on a team if their lives depended on it!

Of course, when there’s one person who is continuously a problem on a team, the best remedy is often to help him or her out the door (“You’re fired”). That said, often that person is a key contributor to the organization, one deemed necessary for some important reason.

**A cautionary tale**

“Bruce” is a difficult guy. The Division General Manager for a large manufacturing company, he is the in-house favorite of the organization’s largest customer, which represents a whopping 35 percent of its annual revenues. But he is unpopular with his own team, because his modus operandi is to make himself indispensable to the client, but to make others on the team scapegoats for any problems. As a result of this behavior, his team doesn’t trust him, they have low motivation and morale, and the attrition rate is far above the rest of the organization. However, because the client has such a strong attachment to Bruce, he never hears negative feedback from his boss, the company president, who keeps him in his role because of his perceived value. The whole dynamic creates a losing setup for the organization. Ultimately, a good client relationship cannot depend on one person. Imagine if one day, Bruce gets run over by a bus on his way to work. He has no successors, because he hasn’t positioned anyone to take on additional responsibility or visibility with the client—and so he leaves the division in chaos, jeopardizing his organization’s largest revenue stream.

**Bad apple behaviors**

There are two types of bad behavior in a corporate context—covert and overt. Overt bad behavior is easy. You know the type: a yeller, a bully, someone who gets overly

emotional or anxious and upsets everyone around. These overt behaviors can be openly challenged and addressed.

Covert bad behavior is often even more insidious and difficult to pinpoint. Bruce exhibits some of the more challenging covert behaviors: taking credit for the work of others and setting others up to fail.

**What you can do about it**

The good news is, leaders are not only born, they’re also made. The best-case scenario? If we remove the bus from the story and go from there, Bruce gets a 360-degree assessment, which opens his eyes to his bad behavior. A good 360-degree assessment consists of gathering concrete and useful feedback from every level surrounding the executive in question. His or her boss, peers, clients

Overt Bad Behavior	Covert Bad Behavior
Not Speaking	Manipulation
Yelling	Gossiping
Repetitiveness	Criticizing without solution
Pouting	Taking credit for the work of others
Being sarcastic	Sacrificing others to look good
Naysaying	Creating drama on the team
Threatening	Shifting the focus off the personal
Complaining	Lying
Blaming	Setting others up to fail

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and direct reports all provide important data, which is then put into a format that can be read and digested over time. (An important recommendation: 360-degree feedback programs only work when they are done well. They can't be used to single out an individual, nor can they be used without preparation and dialogue about how to use the data effectively. For best results, they need a debriefing coach who can uphold confidentiality and provide an anchor for change.)

Because Bruce cares about being perceived well by the client, he probably cares about doing a good job for the organization as well, and may not understand the negative impact of his bad-apple behavior.

Again as a best-case scenario, let's imagine that after he goes through the assessment process, Bruce actually wants to change. He works one-on-one with an executive coach or confidential thinking partner to help him work through the changes he wants to make, create a plan and execute that plan. How likely is it that Bruce will do a 180-degree turnaround after his 360-degree? Not very, but with help, he may eliminate the worst of his behaviors and begin to feel more secure in elevating others into leadership positions. People have been known to change after they have a life-altering experience, and, for some, hearing the truth after years of coddling can be just that. If Bruce makes the decision to change, the bad apple may become a good egg.

However, Bruce may not be open to change. The only way to know is to give him the opportunity through concrete feedback. Let him know the positive relationship he has with the client is at the expense of the team, and therefore the long-term success of the organization. It's always better to retain top talent if they are open to change and growth. Ultimately, it costs less (no recruiting fees, training days, down time or costly upsets with customers) and demonstrates loyalty.

## But what if the bad apple is rotten to the core?

If Bruce won't change, the best thing for the organization is to utter that dreaded phrase: You're fired.

The critical issue here is planning for the day when Bruce is out of a job. Whether Bruce leaves of his own accord, if the team revolts and he can no longer func-

tion, or if he is fired, someone must be identified to take his place.

Many senior leaders don't like to think about succession planning. It's hard to think of ourselves as replaceable, but remember: Leadership is about creating a legacy that can be passed down. All leaders need to think about who might fill their shoes, and how to set them up for success.

Questions to ask before letting go of your bad-apple employee:

1. Who will fill their shoes, and what do you need to do to get the replacement ready for action?
2. What are the distinctions between their job description and what they really do? Is there anything that will be missing that's not understood by Human Resources, or by your recruiting team if you're filling the position from outside the organization?
3. Have you attempted to give direct and honest feedback about the individual's impact, both good and bad?
4. Is it worth investing in this employee to develop or smooth out the rough edges? Do they want to change?
5. What behaviors do you want to reward? What do you want to get rid of? How can this person become a good example for the rest of your employees?

## A few words of encouragement

No matter what you do about your bad apple, the most critical thing is to take action. Tell him or her what the problem is, and be decisive about your course of action. It may not be the perfect solution to let someone go, or to invest more in them when they may fail, but you will be saving your organization and the people in it from an ever-escalating problem. The employee may not thank you, but you can rest assured you've done the right thing.

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