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Dealing with extreme difficult behaviour (EDB)

[In my view](#) / 11 June 2012



There is a small group of people whose behaviour traits can affect everyone around them. Martin J Smith, training consultant, psychotherapist and senior lecturer at Nottingham Trent University, examines extreme difficult behaviour.

Conflict, confrontation, bullying and victimisation are all experienced within organisations on a regular basis.

There is, however, a number of individuals who cause a proportionately higher percentage of difficulties and issues for organisations than any other.

Dealing with them requires a different approach to other forms of workplace conflict and difficult behaviour.

People with extreme difficult behaviour – or EDBs – cause headaches not just for their first line managers but also for many others within and beyond their organisation.

In their eyes they are never wrong, they are always professional and others are very unprofessional.

They are extremely demanding, giving a sense that the next major issue could erupt at any moment (which is often a very minor issue blown out of proportion).



It is important to first identify that the person you are dealing with is an EDB – or, in other words, whether they're a 'predator' or 'prey'.

If we make the mistake of treating a genuine victim as an EDB, we open the doors to unfair treatment and victimisation.

The EDB will claim such things regardless, but it is important the organisation and managers at all levels are clear about the differences between predator (EDB personality traits) and prey (a genuine victim).

“ **At an organisational level, ensure support to the first line manager and a consistent approach at all levels of management. EDBs will exploit any indecision or, worse, inconsistent decisions.**

**Martin J Smith, senior lecturer,
Nottingham Trent University** ”

Warning signs

Some points to consider are the key traits exhibited by the EDB on a regular basis.

Their behaviours crop up in a variety of situations, and are usually accompanied by consistent reports from a range of independent or objective sources about difficult and manipulative behaviour.

Such sources can include staff from different departments and people outside the organisation (especially suppliers, contractors and customers and clients).

There is also evidence from the EDB's own actions and behaviours. Classic warning signs of EDB personality include:

- 1) An emphasis on how professional they are, together with a continued emphasis on how unprofessional everyone else is.
- 2) A complete lack of acceptance of any wrong doing in a given situation, even if there is clear evidence to the contrary.
- 3) A lack of compliance to any instructions from managers. This is often coupled with continued demands for action and calls for managers to justify their decisions.
- 4) Significant mood swings from a high regard of people to very confrontational and withdrawn. Such mood changes occur in a very short time frame.
- 5) They often appear in crisis but decline help and use illness, stress or a disability in a highly manipulative way.

Organisational and interpersonal strategies

An important point to highlight is an EDB's unswaying belief that they are right – any attempt to get them to compromise or, worse still, see another person's point of view is simply not going to work.

When faced with this type of personality most managers fall into the classic default position of trying to help, compromise and find agreeable solutions.

In the first instance these are commendable approaches. But with an EDB they merely cause more problems.

Some important ways to manage this behaviour must include a mix of organisational and interpersonal strategies. One without the other allows the EDB to exploit uncertainty.

Examples of key strategies include:

- 1) At an organisational level, make sure you support the first line manager and ensure that there's a consistent approach at all levels of management.
- 2) EDBs will exploit any indecision or, worse, inconsistent decisions. There must be a considered, gradual approach to dealing with an EDB.
- 3) At an interpersonal level managers must maintain control. They need to be clear that an EDB will exploit any doubts they have about their capabilities.

It is crucial that there are precise and clear instructions that adhere tightly to procedure and policy with clear, objective reasons. Managers need to realise that the default-standard management style does not work with an EDB and a more careful structured approach is required.

Martin J Smith PhD has spent the last few years studying extreme difficult behaviour.

For more information on EDB personalities and his forthcoming research email:
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Comments

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Adisha Kariyawasam - 12 Jun 2012

★★★★★

Very good article Martin - Thank you. The information you have provided is particularly relevant in these times of austerity and rapid transformational organisational change. In addition to the predator/prey scenario, consideration should be given to the Karpman 'drama' triangle of Hero, Victim and Villain which some staff may field that they fall into. True behavioural change occurs when the member of staff is able to step off the triangle and observe the situation objectively.

William Richard Masters - 12 Jun 2012

★★★★★

Well done Martin, a most excellent article!

Claire Lee - 12 Jun 2012

★★★★☆

Hello This article very effectively describes the type of person who is difficult to manage. Can you provide any extra detail on strategies for dealing with them? Many thanks

Michael Green - 13 Jun 2012

★★★★★

Excellent - I have someone in my team who is an EDB - it has got to the point where I have wondered about my (and his) sanity! The information in the article explains a lot.

