



# Danger

**Passive Aggression  
At Work**

**I**n their 2005 Harvard Business Review article, *The Passive-Aggressive Organization*, authors Gary Neilson, Bruce Pasternack, and Karen Van Nuys describe a healthy organizational culture as one in which “managers have access to good, timely information, the authority to make informed decisions, and the incentives to make them on behalf of the organization, which promptly and capably carries them out.”

Unfortunately, in a Booz Allen Hamilton survey of more than 30,000 people around the globe, only one in five respondents described their organizations that way. The largest number of respondents described their workplace as passive-aggressive.

# origins

**P**assive-aggressive behavior is a mechanism by which individuals resist job and social demands. Passive-aggressive individuals' childhoods were often marked by warmth and attentiveness that was abruptly withdrawn – during a divorce, the birth of a sibling, etc. – and replaced by demands for high performance. Expressions of annoyance or frustration were not allowed.

These experiences create adults who resent those more successful than themselves and tend to view authority figures as incompetent and unfair. At work, although they may be personally ambitious, they tend to pursue their own agendas and become irritated when that agenda is interrupted.

Passive-aggressive individuals expect to be exploited. As a result, they are unlikely to offer substantive contributions to team projects, and prefer remaining isolated to avoid the risk of being controlled by others.

# measuring passive-aggressive behavior

**P**assive-aggressive tendencies are part of personality. There are two sides to personality, the bright side and the dark side. Bright-side personality describes the strengths and weaknesses people display when they are at their best. Dark-side personality describes personality characteristics that are strengths under normal circumstances. Under increased stress, pressure, or boredom, people tend to overuse those strengths, and they can become powerful career derailers.

**The Hogan Development Survey measures dark-side personality along 11 characteristics. We measure passive-aggressive tendencies using the HDS Leisurely scale. People scoring at different levels on the Leisurely scale are typically described as follows:**

**No- and low-risk individuals** seem cooperative, flexible, and responsive to feedback and coaching. However, they tend to be easily distracted by interruptions, new ideas, and social interactions, and can be reluctant to express opinions.

**Individuals who score moderately low** on the HDS Leisurely scale seem cheerful and optimistic. They are willing to express constructive criticism, and are helpful to colleagues faced with heavy workloads, pressing deadlines, or personal stress.

**Moderately high-Leisurely individuals** seem socially skilled and capable of making a positive first impression on others. They are overtly cooperative, but irritable when interrupted or given additional assignments on top of an already heavy workload.

**Individuals who score high** on the Leisurely scale value independence to the point of resisting requests from others. They are covertly critical of people in authority, quick to feel exploited, and immune to feedback or criticism.

# the upside of passive-aggressive behavior

In his article, *Oh, Fine, You're Right. I'm Passive-Aggressive*, New York Times science and medical writer Benedict Carey points out that, in many cases, passive-aggressive behavior stems from a positive instinct for self preservation.

During 2 million years of pre-history, humans lived in egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies, and there was constant warfare between them. Survival for early humans depended on getting along and gaining acceptance within the group. Individuals who didn't get along were ostracized or killed. These master motives were instilled in us thousands of years ago, but they are still relevant today.

"Many times, high-Leisurely people have a strong desire to fit into the group," said Jennifer Lowe, a consultant at Hogan. "So any time someone asks them to do something, they agree. When they get overloaded, high-Leisurely individuals' passive-aggressive nature emerges. They come to resent the additional work, and will put them off in favor of their personal agenda."

Sometimes mild passive-aggressive behavior can be an effective means to avoid a damaging confrontation.

"A joke can be the most skillful passive-aggressive act there is," Dr. Scott Wetzler, a clinical psychologist, said in the article. An individual recognizes a coming confrontation, and finds a clever way to release the tension.

# passive-aggressive work culture

In the workplace, the idiom holds true that one rotten apple can spoil the whole bunch, especially when the bad apple is in a leadership position.

Leader personality determines organizational culture. Passive-aggressive leaders tend to reward compliance and punish dissent or criticism, even if it is constructive. They have trouble assigning authority to others, especially to individuals they perceive as more capable than themselves, and withhold resources and information to maintain a position of power.

Employees in a passive-aggressive culture likely have a hard time gathering the resources or authority to pursue even promising ideas. If they do manage to finish a project, it is often met with a chorus of second-guessing. Employee engagement is likely to plummet, and the most talented among them will seek employment elsewhere.

# developmental recommendations

**P**assive-aggressive employees appear charming and receptive to developmental feedback. However, this self-presentation masks significant resentment that he or she should be asked to change. Citing specific examples of performance that could be improved and offering recommendations as strategies to enhance his or her stature in the workplace may help the high-Leisurely individual accept feedback constructively. Specifically, high-Leisurely employees can be encouraged to:

- **Risk direct statements** of frustration or annoyance when feeling overwhelmed or challenged.
- **Consider the possibilities** that others achieved positions of authority because they are, in fact, competent and that conforming to expectations is not a threat to self-sufficiency.
- **Build the trust of others** by requesting their opinions and by assisting them as much as possible.
- **Generate explicit timelines** for completing tasks, making a commitment to follow these self-generated expectations.
- **Limit the promises** made to others but ensure that these commitments are fulfilled as promised.

# about Hogan

Drs. Joyce and Robert Hogan challenged decades of academic tradition and criticism to become the first to demonstrate personality's impact on organizational effectiveness. Founded in 1987, Hogan Assessment Systems pioneered the use of personality assessment to improve workplace performance.

Our flagship assessment, the Hogan Personality Inventory, was the first measure of normal personality designed specifically for the business community, and the Hogan Development Survey was the first assessment to deal with performance risks outside the standard model of personality.

Twenty-five years later, we are committed to continuing the same spirit of innovation and attention to science that helped us grow from a four-employee test publisher to one of the most successful and well-regarded assessment providers in the world.

**Find out more at [www.hoganassessments.com](http://www.hoganassessments.com)**