

Munchausen at Work

by Nathan Bennett

One particularly disturbing psychological disorder is Munchausen by proxy, in which a caregiver exaggerates, fabricates, or induces illness in another person in order to get praise for then helping the victim. A similar pathology occurs in workplaces when employees create fictitious organizational problems, only to solve them. This behavior, which I call Munchausen at work (MAW), wastes managerial time and resources and can threaten morale and productivity. I set about defining its characteristics after being struck by accounts of MAW behavior among team members in the course of three years studying factors affecting team performance in more than 30 companies across industries. Although MAW is infrequent, most experienced managers have encountered it, and they acknowledge that it can be highly disruptive.

Consider this case from a *Fortune* 100 professional services firm that I studied. "Philip" had a reputation for his ability to get people to work together. He would proudly share tales of how, under his guidance, people in vigorous conflict had rebuilt productive working relationships. Upper management often praised him for this ability, and he was one of the first people put on any key client's team. But over time it emerged that the conflicts Philip so adeptly defused were of his own creation.

From bits of information gathered from many teams, management discovered that in the early stages of a project, before the team had had a chance to establish healthy relationships, Philip would target individuals in whom to plant the seeds of conflict. In one case he worked subtly to convince "Mary" that "Tom" did not want to work with her, and shortly thereafter convinced Tom that Mary was reluctant to be his teammate. In no time a dysfunctional relationship between the two became obvious to all. Philip then expertly resolved the conflict, using his insider knowledge of its causes. Management's suspicions about Philip's behavior were confirmed when early team dynamics improved after Philip had been removed from team roles.

Munchausen at work runs the spectrum

from highly destructive tactics like Philip's to nuisance behaviors that quietly corrode organizational effectiveness. It may involve simply embellishing a real problem or making it appear that one looms on the horizon. Just as solving a problem of one's own creation can generate rewards, so can bringing an inflated or predicted "crisis" to the attention of others.

Some MAW perpetrators—I call this type the "reluctant hero"—withhold valued but discretionary contributions at work in order to generate problems that will lead others to implore them to return to duty. For example, an employee may create some dependency within the organization by volunteering to mentor new hires and then threaten to give up the role, citing competing obligations. The perpetrator doesn't necessarily want to withdraw but does want to win attention for remaining. Of course employees often have legitimate reasons for shedding discretionary duties. But MAW perpetrators engage in a regular, destabilizing pattern of commitment and withdrawal.

Another type, the "do-looper" (named after computer routines that run repeatedly if conditions are right), constantly lights small fires and then puts them out. Most do-looping involves first creating and then remedying shortages of supplies, information, or other resources. One do-looper I encountered was brilliant at fixing travel-agency mistakes for his boss, and was often praised for his efforts. It was eventually discovered that the mistakes he "fixed" had never actually occurred.

Many managers I've spoken with nod knowingly when I describe MAW. However, diagnosis is difficult. A manager who suspects an employee of Munchausen at work should ask these questions:

- Is the employee disproportionately involved in identifying and fighting fires?
- Is the employee unusually resistant to offers of help in addressing problems he or she has identified?
- Does the employee deflect management's efforts to understand a problem's underlying cause?

- Are the facts and coworkers' accounts at odds with the employee's claims about a problem's existence or severity?

- Are problems with a project, a customer, or a process, or between colleagues, frequently resolved in the employee's absence?

"Yes" answers to these questions don't conclusively confirm MAW, of course. But they signal that managers may want to be on the alert for repeated episodes and to validate their suspicions with multiple observers. If Munchausen at work seems likely, the best remedies are to reduce the attention and other

rewards that are tied to solutions and, more broadly, to limit perpetrators' opportunities for creating specific problems.

Nathan Bennett (nate@gatech.edu) is the Catherine W. and Edwin A. Wahlen Professor of Management at Georgia Tech's College of Management in Atlanta.
