

# Avoid being a target

Manipulation is a learned behaviour – no one is born with it. However, when dealing with it, it's a waste of our time trying to analyse the behaviour.

**Dr Mary Casey** says our time is better invested in developing strategies to protect ourselves from manipulation in the workplace

Is there a particular person in your workplace who turns your days into a series of battles? Or do they make you feel helpless, powerless or drained after every interaction? Whether the situation involves a manager, co-worker, or your own staff, many of us have had to deal with someone who simply made our work life a nightmare.

Conflict at work will occur from time to time. But if the conflict is ongoing with a particular person, and you are adversely affected by every interaction, it is highly likely you are being manipulated.

Many years ago, I became a target for a manipulator who worked for me. Over a long period of time, I often felt sick, confused, angry and constantly frustrated simply because I was not aware that I was being manipulated.

Although I am an independent, strong and intelligent person, I lacked personal boundaries. As a result, I allowed this person to make decisions and make changes without asking anyone and basically do what she wanted. I did this because I thought that she was a great worker and motivated to grow the business. The truth was that this person was intimidated by anyone who was smart or assertive. And so, anyone else who had these skills was underhandedly shafted until they either left the company or were dismissed following their attempts to make me see what was happening.

It was by employing an HR manager that everything finally came to light for me because he could see the whole situation with fresh eyes and a clear mind. I began to learn more about myself; why I was a perfect target and the things that I needed to change in order to not be a victim.

The lessons I learned from this situation motivated me to study manipulation, and in doing so it became evident that it is widespread – not just in workplaces, but also in friendships and families.

In my research I developed strategies to identify manipulative behaviours and to deal with them to ensure we are never a target.

I learned that the goals of manipulation are to covertly or overtly control and overpower someone so that the other person will do what the manipulator wants. It is the use of subversive, unhealthy power tactics to get something for themselves, even if it robs another person of their freedom of choice, reason and rationality. Because it's about control, manipulation is prevalent in the workplace, which usually has a hierarchical structure. To control others, manipulators can abuse their positions, authority, or responsibilities; and they will not overstep accepted

boundaries in the workplace. They can be aggressive or passive aggressive.

The control gestures manipulators use include emotional blackmail, dishonest yet persuasive language, discrediting others, deflecting the issue at hand when confronted, concealed threats and lies or distortion of the facts. What's interesting is most manipulators don't realise they are doing this because their behaviour is fed by their own insecurities or a view of life as a struggle for survival, a series of battles. Hence the need to mark their territory, secure 'allies' and use emotional tactics.

Manipulation is a learned behaviour – no one is born with it. When dealing with it, however, it is a waste of our time trying to analyse it. Our time is better invested in developing strategies to protect ourselves, because we can never change a manipulator's actions – we can only work on avoiding being a target.

So how do you deal with manipulation? People do what they do because they can, so firstly it's important to define our limits and set boundaries by being assertive. Seeing your strong boundaries, a manipulator will find you a difficult target.

When confronting the behaviour, avoid sarcasm, hostility, threats and put downs. Manipulators are masters at the emotional game and will use any emotional reaction on your part as evidence that you are the abuser. It's very important therefore that you always deal with the behaviour, not the person. This will ensure you disengage emotionally and think rationally – unemotional assertiveness is an attitude a manipulator cannot match.

Manipulators will also offer excuses for their behaviour, divert the subject to a minor issue, or shift the blame. They are also known to distort the truth, twist anything you may have said to them in the

### Dr Casey's 7 tactics to deal with manipulation

- 1 Control your emotions, or disengage:** They are experts at emotional games and will use your anger or frustration as evidence that you are the abuser.
- 2 Observe only outcomes:** Don't try to second-guess the meaning behind their words or actions.
- 3 Be clear and specific:** Ask for what you want precisely; ensure your body language backs your words.
- 4 Act fast:** They interpret your silence as agreement if you wait for the 'right time' to address the issue.
- 5 Keep them responsible:** When they try to shift the blame, focus on their behaviour.
- 6 Stand your ground:** Repeat the same statement until they realise you will not change your mind.
- 7 Accept no excuse for inappropriate behaviour.** Re-focus on the issue you are trying to confront.

### Offensive tactics used by manipulators

**Refutation:** Denying they have done wrong

**Distraction:** Changing the subject to evade the issue or gain time

**Threats:** Using concealed or open threats to keep their targets anxious

**Fostering guilt:** Suggesting you are selfish to make you feel bad and want to repair the 'damage'

**Charm:** Praise and flatter openly to gain the trust and confidence of others

**Accusations or discrediting:** Shift the blame to others and detract in subtle, hard-to-detect ways

**Deception:** Withhold large amounts of the truth, distort the truth, or are vague

past, lie openly and downplay the effects of their own behaviour. Always re-focus on the issue at hand, keep the responsibility where it belongs, and deal with the behaviour immediately.

### The role of HR in dealing with manipulation

A company's HR department is key to dealing with manipulation in the workplace. HR creates the policies and procedures and when they are enforced consistently, they soon create a culture. It's important to set company values, and create policies and procedures for Conflict Management, Access, Abuse, Sexual Harassment & Bullying, Attitude and Behaviour, Employee Grievances and Disciplinary Actions. Depending on the size of your company, I would even recommend creating a policy exclusively for middle management with guidelines on how to deal with frustrating situations, people's attitudes and other sensitive situations.

The idea with policies is to make manipulation very difficult. While it would be difficult to set procedures directly against manipulation, you can set them for the behaviours used by manipulators. One of the interesting things about negativity or gossiping, for instance, is that these manipulative tactics cannot exist if no one agrees to listen.

Dealing effectively with manipulation is, at its core, about thinking differently, which is very easy on a rational level, but daunting on an emotional level.

### Dealing with manipulation in a subordinate or staff

In my own company, which has 200 employees, I worked closely with our HR department to develop policies and procedures that focused on the company culture and on assertive communication. All employees were also required to attend communication courses that focused on dealing with conflict and manipulation. Seeing the change in our company procedures – and that she would no longer



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be able to manipulate others with the new learning they received – the manipulator in my business voluntarily resigned.

When you want to avoid hiring a manipulator in the first place, the first difficulty is spotting it when someone is in front of you for half an hour. I would suggest allowing the candidate to start working while monitoring their trial period very closely for negative behaviour. Another idea is to also get feedback from other staff.

### Dealing with manipulation in a manager or boss

While it's a good idea for HR to be empowered to deal with manipulation, higher management needs to recognise that manipulation exists or, in the worst-case scenario, not be manipulative themselves.

When the manipulative person is your manager or boss, you really are in a tenuous situation. Their behaviour may cause you stress and other health issues, lack of motivation, frustration and anxiety – all of which would very likely affect your personal life.

The only way to protect yourself and regain control is to disengage from the relationship. This can be done in two ways:

- » Disengage emotionally. This is where you set your boundaries and use assertive behaviour with your manager, and in doing so you are willing to sacrifice their positive feedback or recognition. You can continue to expect your salary and other benefits of the job.
- » Disengage physically. If you cannot find a happy medium by disengaging emotionally, the next step is to leave your job. Your health – and very likely your spouse or partner, who has seen the effect on you – will thank you for it!

When applying for positions, keep in mind that a sign of manipulation in management is a high staff turnover in that department. **HC**



#### How to Deal with Master Manipulators

Dr Mary Casey's informative DVD and workbook helps identify manipulators at home and work and presents strategies to deal with them effectively. The package includes various scenarios, role play and case studies. Available for \$29.95 from [www.dealwithmanipulators.com](http://www.dealwithmanipulators.com).

For information about upcoming workshops on Dealing with Manipulators, call 1300 175 783.

#### About the author

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