I was a personality before I became a person. I am simple, complex, generous, selfish, unattractive, beautiful, lazy and driven.

—Barbra Streisand

I have an inferiority complex, but not a very good one!

—Anonymous

During the course of their careers, organizational consultants, leadership coaches, psychotherapists and psychoanalysts often meet people who present a bewildering array of responses and behaviors. In making sense of such people, psychologically trained professionals often resort to traditional psychiatric classification schemes. One helpful way of going beyond narrow boundaries in the classification of conduct is to take a closer look at the concept of the psychological "complex.'

In everyday language, people use the word "complex" to refer to just about any psychological or emotional difficulty. It is more precise than that, however. Applied correctly, the term "complex" creates a common reference point; in effect, it maps a person’s psychological makeup. To correctly ascribe the label "complex" to what an individual is experiencing implies that we have identified several clinically recognizable features, symptoms, or characteristics that are occurring simultaneously in that person. Although we refer to someone "having a complex," it is really the other way around: it is the complex that has the person.

Because of the unconscious origin of most complexes, these combinations of thoughts, feelings and desires can put false ideas into our heads, resulting in irrational, distorted conceptions about ourselves, other people and situations. Because of distortions such as those listed above, many complexes are highly detrimental to our sense of self-esteem and will influence the way we deal with others. The themes central to the complex tell us that we are incompetent, unlovable or unattractive, thus creating specific intrapersonal and interpersonal problems.

In trying to find the origin of a complex, we have to go back to childhood experiences. The nature and quality of the parent–child interface goes a long way toward explaining a complex’s beginnings. If we want to understand the contributing factors in any given case, we have to ask questions such as: How attuned was the relationship between parent(s) and child? Were the parents able to create "age-appropriate frustration," denying demands that were unreasonable but granting most others, or were they deaf to the child’s desires? These frustrations may contribute to the formation of a complex.

Conversely, parents who are overprotective may sow the seeds of a complex in their children. If they indulge and reward their children so lavishly that the children develop unrealistic expectations of how the world should treat them, as adults those children may have trouble dealing with reality. Having received the message that their abilities and possibilities are unlimited, that they are in some way superior to other people, they may experience self-esteem problems when the world tells them they are ordinary. They may carry burdensome feelings of self-doubt or exaggerated self-confidence (or some of each, depending on how their unique complex develops) based on their childhood experiences.

The tendency of some parents to stereotype their children also contributes to complexes in adulthood. Parents who unwittingly send the message that a child is temperamentally, behaves like a klutz, or is unattractive,
lazy, stubborn, or clumsy (or any other attribution) have no idea how powerful that message is. In adulthood, most children of such parents find it difficult to relinquish the attributions given to them by the parents who, in a youngster’s eyes, are all-powerful and all-knowing.

Not all complexes result from parental messages, however. Some arise from incidents that happened outside the home—exceptionally easy successes, guilty episodes that resulted in shameful memories, episodes of rejection or adulation, or any other major life event or transition. These experiences become part of the template that dictates how people perceive and deal with the world at large.

A “COMPLEX” HISTORY

Probably the most widely known complex is the “inferiority complex,” described in the first decade of the 20th century by Alfred Adler, one of the early disciples of Sigmund Freud. According to Adler, perceived organ inferiority—a weakness or defect in some part of the body—is at the basis of this complex. The primary indication of this complex (of which the person is usually unaware) is a persistent feeling of inadequacy or a tendency towards self-diminishment. Someone under the sway of this complex may feel a strong urge to overcompensate for it, however, resulting in either spectacular achievements or deviant, destructive behavior. For example, a youngster who at school is ridiculed because of his inability in athletics may, as an adult, compensate for this inadequacy by making a great effort to acquire power so that he or she can control others.

Before Adler identified the concept of the inferiority complex, Freud had already introduced into the psychological literature the notion of the “Oedipus complex,” a triadic relationship that he believed all children experience when growing up. (The name comes from the Greek myth of Oedipus, a man who unknowingly kills his father, Laius, and marries his mother, Jocasta.) The term “complex,” however, was further popularized by Carl Jung, who suggested that all human beings possess a number of psychological predispositions, or “archetypes.” According to Jung, several complexes occur simultaneously in most people, varying by person, and have as their core an archetypal theme with the same name as the complex (the death complex, for example, growing out of the death archetype).

What we can conclude from this short overview is that any cluster of suppressed tendencies and experiences that shows activity independent of the conscious mind can be considered a complex. In that respect, we can find many similarities between a complex and a personality or character type. However, there is greater definitional clarity using the notion of personality types. The boundaries are more muddled for complexes, but the net that captures them is wider.

COMMON WORKPLACE COMPLEXES

Let us now turn to a number of complexes common to the workplace. I regularly encounter some of these complexes in my coaching and consulting work; others I have seen embodied only by reading the business press. In listing these habitual modes of behavior I am building on Sigmund Freud’s work “Some Character Types Met with in Psychoanalytic Work.” In that study he offers a number of brilliant insights into the behavior not only of his patients, but also of well-known figures from literature such as Lady Macbeth and Richard III.

The God Complex

Individuals who are said to have a God complex (or messianic complex) do not actually believe that they are God; rather, they act in an arrogant, haughty manner suggestive of divine authority. This complex is quite similar to what has been described as the narcissistic personality.
Some of the major movers and shakers within the world of politics, business and finance – the so-called Masters of the Universe – seem to be driven by this particular complex. An exemplar can be found in the special class of nouveau riche Wall Street wheeler-dealers that Thomas Wolfe describes in his novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*—men and women who came of age in the 1980s. The protagonist of that novel, Sherman McCoy, insulated by his newly acquired wealth and its accoutrements, embodies the God complex. Sitting in his expensive Mercedes sports car with his mistress by his side, he subjects the reader of the novel to a self-congratulatory stream of consciousness. But ‘Master of the Universe’ McCoy loses his mental equilibrium when, in a freak accident in the Bronx, his mistress, taking a turn at the wheel, accidentally drives over a young black man. Fearful of the dangers a white man faces in a hostile black neighborhood, he flees the scene for the guilty safety of the mistress’s turf and his Park Avenue home. Prosecutors, politicians, the press, the police, the clergy and assorted hustlers close in on McCoy as he tries to deal with the unraveling of his gilded life.

People suffering from the God complex have such a tenuous grip on reality that they indulge in fantasies of omnipotence and omniscience. Possessing a grandiose sense of self-importance, they act in pompous, arrogant and disdainful ways. Attention-getters who like to be in the limelight, they exaggerate their achievements and talents, convincing even themselves with their fantasies of unlimited success and fame. Needing a constant supply of narcissistic fuel, these individuals require sustained admiration, attention and affirmation. To that end, they tend to surround themselves with sycophants who encourage them in their self-centered, self-indulgent behavior.

Such people are not particularly responsive to the needs of others. Lacking empathy, they seem unable or unwilling to identify with, acknowledge, or accept the feelings, needs, preferences, priorities, and choices of people they interact with. On the contrary, they shamelessly take others for granted. They are ‘interpersonally exploitative,’” meaning that they have a knack for using others for their own ends. They expect special favors from others without giving any thought to reciprocation.

A strong sense of entitlement is another characteristic of people driven by the God complex. They believe that the world owes them, big time. They feel that they deserve what they want when they want it. They seem to maintain their sense of self-worth by rigidly insisting that they are above the madding crowd. Believing that rules are for others – the hoi polloi – but not for them, they demand automatic and full compliance with their expectations of priority treatment. Furthermore, being full of themselves, they try to associate only with other special or high-status people (or institutions).

The mental equilibrium of people with the God complex is delicate, however. They tend to be extremely envious of others. With that comparative mindset, they quickly view themselves as being wronged and respond with paranoia when they do not get what they want. When frustrated, contradicted, or confronted by people whom they consider inferior to themselves, they sometimes explode in bouts of rage.

Given their narcissistic predisposition, people under the influence of the God complex prefer the world of illusion to the tedium and demands of real accomplishments, though they discuss their triumphs with anyone who will listen. Yet when an outsider takes a closer look, many of their touted accomplishments turn out to be produced with smoke and mirrors, devoid of much substance.

Because the God complex makes them competitive, ambitious and self-assured, these people often find themselves in positions of leadership. Unfortunately, in an organizational setting, their self-centered behavior may give rise to serious problems. Surrounded as they often are by sycophants, they may lose touch with reality, making decisions on inadequate information (all
messengers of bad news having long since been “killed”). They may even resort to unethical behavior, given their attitude that rules are meant only for others. Predictably, organizations led by such people have difficulty keeping competent people. Principled men and women who refuse to be yea-sayers tend to leave. For that reason, many organizations led by people with the God complex have ended up in reorganization or bankruptcy.

The God complex, like all complexes, has its origins in early conflicts in interpersonal relationships. The roots are typically found in parental understimulation or overstimulation. In the case of the former, the parents are unable to adequately nourish their children emotionally—that is, to give them the attention they need. Consequently, those children escape into their own world and remain “stuck” at a developmental stage in which their sense of self remains grandiose and unrealistic. The child remains psychologically dependent on approval from others for his or her sense of self-esteem. In the case of overstimulation, the parents’ indulgence of their children’s moods and demands freezes those youngsters in a state of childlike grandiosity, making them think of themselves as extremely “special.” Their resulting need for special treatment becomes an obsession that remains with them in adulthood.

For a good real-life illustration of the God complex, we can look to the behavior of Dennis Kozlowski, the former chief executive officer (CEO) of Tyco International, a conglomerate with business interests that include electronic components, health care, fire safety, security, and fluid control. The 40th birthday party Kozlowski gave for his wife, a bash with a price tag of $2 million, is indicative of what happens when this complex is in full swing. Tyco footed about half the bill for this party in Sardinia, which featured an ice sculpture of Michelangelo’s David spewing vodka from his penis and a birthday cake in the shape of a woman’s breast with sparklers mounted on top. To make the expense even more formidable, the singer Jimmy Buffett and his group were flown in at a cost of $250,000.

This sort of plundering of company resources was not Kozlowski’s only indulgence. He was also accused of avoiding more than $1 million in sales tax on six pieces of art he purchased in 2001 for $13.1 million. He had bought the art, including works by Monet and Renoir, for his Manhattan apartment, but claimed the pieces were being sent to Tyco’s New Hampshire headquarters, in order to elude New York sales tax. Clearly he thought that the world’s rules did not apply to him. Due to that perspective, and to his various financial excesses – he was accused of plundering Tyco to the tune of $600 million – he may end up spending up to 25 years in prison.

The Sisyphus Complex

Sisyphus, a king of Corinth in Greek mythology, was lauded as a clever but devious man who killed travelers and guests in violation of the laws of hospitality. He was condemned by the gods after first deceiving Hades, Lord of the Underworld, and then locking him up. With Hades unable to guide humans into the Underworld, a crisis developed: no human could die. As punishment for his trickery, Sisyphus was sentenced to roll a huge rock up a steep hill ceaselessly. The rock, before it reached the summit, always escaped, requiring him to start the whole meaningless process all over again. As the writer Albert Camus once said, “Sisyphus is the absurd hero.”

In psychological terms, Sisyphus was doomed to a life of nonproductivity, a life spent performing a specific task over and over again, but never to completion. Worse yet, he was cursed with the knowledge that, because the top of the hill could never be reached, his work would be for naught. In other words, the purpose in his life was to accomplish exactly nothing. The gods seem to have reasoned that there is no sentence more terrible than meaningless and hopeless work.

In organizations, we regularly encounter people who suffer from the Sisyphus complex. Needing to be constantly busy, these
individuals keep on pushing the organization’s “rocks” without ever asking themselves why they are doing what they are doing. Successful as these people may be at accomplishing certain tasks, they never feel a sense of satisfaction. Rather, they rush on to new goals and new challenges—goals that often have no inherent meaning or objective—rather than questioning why they are running or what they are running toward. Feeling like T. S. Eliot’s J. Alfred Prufrock, who said, “I have measured out my life with coffee spoons,” they get restless the moment a task is completed.

Although the driven nature of the Sisyphean complex can result in positive career repercussions, Sisyphean workers are in danger of losing their sense of balance and perspective in the pursuit of immediate goals. Because reflection is not part of their mental makeup, they are unable to develop and pursue a long-term strategic orientation. They are so focused on immediate results that they are unable to engage in the exploration necessary to the development of tomorrow’s business. In addition, their sense of focus is often underdeveloped, creating difficulties when companies are faced with market discontinuities.

Furthermore, if people with the Sisyphean complex are in a senior position and thus play the role of culture carrier, their behavior can become contagious. In their mindless pursuit of the next challenge, they may create an over-competitive culture that encourages people to work hard rather than work smart; a culture where people are concerned only with short-term wins, thereby losing the broader perspective; a culture that ignores ethical and social considerations. Only certain people can survive in such a culture: people who work hard rather than smart; a culture where people are concerned only with short-term wins, thereby losing the broader perspective; a culture that ignores ethical and social considerations. Only certain people can survive in such a culture: people who work hard rather than smart; a culture where people are concerned only with short-term wins, thereby losing the broader perspective; a culture that ignores ethical and social considerations. Only certain people can survive in such a culture: people who themselves favor the Sisyphean mindset. The result is an organization full of insecure, tough-minded, workaholic overachievers.

Many executives in Japanese companies appear to follow the Sisyphean template. In fact, quite a number of Japanese executives die each year from overwork—enough so that there is a term for that phenomenon in Japan: karoshi. There is so much concern in Japan about karoshi that families there have sued companies for their failure to intervene in an employee’s self-destructive behavior.

People with a Sisyphean orientation generally experience personal distress as well as work dissatisfaction, as the extreme nature of karoshi suggests: unable to stop and smell the roses, these people feel directionless and unfulfilled unless they are pursuing yet another challenge, and another, and another. They confuse ends and means, thereby stunting their life. They compose endless lists of “shoulds” at home as well as at the office, and they tackle those lists at the expense of their own wants and desires. But since time is limited, not everything gets done. So, obsessed as they are with getting things done at work, they neglect their personal lives. As their personal lives suffer, they respond to that new discomfort by working even harder at getting more things done at work—and the vicious cycle created by the Sisyphean complex accelerates. Their addictive behavior, and their tendency to see themselves as what they do rather than what they are, drives them to the next challenge and the next, as life passes them by. At its most intense, such behavior drives up stress levels, divorce rates and early deaths on retirement.

This kind of behavior is often rooted in a family of origin that values control over most other virtues. Children who try to please parents that emphasize discipline, order, reliability, loyalty, integrity, and perseverance tend to become extremely self-disciplined, restrained, and self-critical. Children who feel valued only because of their achievements never feel appreciated as human beings; they value themselves only on the basis of other people’s approval of their accomplishments. Thus their goal in life is to try ever harder to please first their parents and then, later, people in positions of authority. Because their parents judged them harshly when, as youngsters, they failed to live up to parental standard, as adults these people are harsh in their judgment of themselves.

John Pearson (name disguised), vice president of communications at a global media
company, is a good example of a person under the sway of the Sisyphus complex. John was infamous for his long work hours, his intensity, and his devotion to his job. He seemed to need very little sleep. The organization was his life; he had no outside hobbies, and did not seem to miss them, nor did he believe in socializing or taking vacations. Thriving on multiple deadline pressures, he loved to work on many projects and tasks at the same time.

Although John was quite productive at work, there were some problems with his performance. He had poor relationships with people who didn’t share his work addiction: he would push them to see things his way, and then push them even harder. Furthermore, because he had no time or energy for family life and friends, his marriage suffered. One day his wife declared that she couldn’t stand living with him any longer and demanded a divorce. This declaration came totally out of the blue for John, who had been so driven at work that his interpersonal radar had not been functioning properly. Wanting to save his marriage, John agreed to see a family counselor. After a number of difficult sessions, the family therapy with his wife started to have an effect on him. He made a serious effort to spend time with his wife and children, and found that he enjoyed that time immensely. He even began to include social activities in his weekly agenda.

Was getting away from his Sisyphean behavior easy for John? Not at all! It was an uphill battle. To use his own words:

I’m embarrassed at how my mind loses focus when I’m with people I care about. Even if I don’t turn the subject of conversation around to my work, I’m thinking about it while I talk to someone. I realize that I need to rediscover how to do nothing; learn how to relax; relearn that rest isn’t a waste of time. Activity isn’t necessarily productivity. But I also realize that this preoccupation with business is an attempt on my part to control an outcome that’s mostly beyond my control. I’m becoming aware of the fact that there’s a difference between commitment and compulsion, between passion and obsession. Lately, however, I feel less dependent on the approval of others. I’ve come to realize that I’ve been working extremely hard without enjoying what I’ve been doing. It was like being on automatic pilot. So now I’m working on overcoming feeling guilty when relaxing. For example, I don’t look at my e-mail during the weekend, and I answer calls only from family and friends on my mobile phone during that time. I realize that my challenge is to work smarter rather than longer and to resist technology’s seductive call to stay forever connected.

The Nobel Prize Complex

A certain amount of anxiety is typical for anybody who is subject to public scrutiny and is under the gun to perform well. What people who suffer from the Nobel Prize complex feel is more than that baseline anxiety. These people, having been successful at lower levels of the organization, put so much pressure on themselves to attain Nobel Prize–worthy goals as they climb the career ladder that by the time they reach a senior position they are obsessed with failure. Wanting to excel but expecting to fail, they fear making mistakes. And even if they meet 1 goal, or 2 or 10, that never feels good enough. They set such unattainable, unrealistic standards for themselves that even Superman could not attain them. The inevitable “failures” that result fuel self-defeating thoughts and behaviors.

While these people are the authors of their own misery, they rarely see it that way. They believe that their perfectionist self-expectations are merely mirrors of the expectations that others have of them, a perception that adds to the pressure. They assume that, because of their perceived (distorted) deficiencies, they will be judged harshly, perhaps
even ridiculed. Fearing that they will be rejected and humiliated if they let others see their flaws, they isolate themselves behind their public façade, where their driven search for perfection leads to loneliness and paralysis of action.

People under the sway of the Nobel Prize complex engage in all-or-nothing thinking. Even if they have a string of successes under their belt, they believe that they are worthless if those accomplishments are not perfect—and what accomplishment ever is? Having completely lost their sense of perspective, they don’t see that the black and whites of life are highlighted and enriched by shades of gray. And they apply that all-or-nothing approach to others as well as to themselves. While they see their own flaws to the exclusion of their virtues, in others they see only the good. They believe that others achieve success with a minimum of effort, few errors, little emotional stress, and maximum self-confidence. Because they have attained a position of leadership despite all that—despite their own worthlessness and others’ worth—they feel that they are impostors. And they fear that others, seeing that disparity of worth, will resent their successes.

The consequence of this psychological muddle is that people with this complex become paralyzed at the workplace. They overanalyze decisions; they procrastinate; they keep their options open as long as possible; they hesitate to give direction. When people in a senior position in an organization adopt the analysis/paralysis approach to work, it can have disastrous consequences for the entire organization. Ironically, that approach helps bring about exactly the personal failure that these people have been fearing.

Whatever these people do, they are damned, because the Nobel Prize complex sets into motion a vicious cycle. First, these people set excessively high goals for themselves. Second, they fail to meet these goals—because, after all, the goals were impossible to begin with! Third, they perceive their predictable failures as serious setbacks and, obsessing on those setbacks, find themselves further reducing their productivity and effectiveness. Fourth, they blame themselves for their ineffectiveness, contributing to self-esteem problems, anxiety, decision paralysis and sometimes depression. As noted earlier, even if they succeed initially they eventually fail, because their success makes them anxious: they fear that the green-eyed monster of envy will strike.

Looking for origins of the Nobel Prize complex, we generally discover that these people are conflicted about authority, about independence and being able to “do their own thing,” and on doing better than their parent(s). Typically they grew up in a household where one or both parents were competitive. Fledgling Nobel Prize seekers try to emulate their parents, internalizing their competitive behavior and high standards. But this striving becomes a minefield, because while they want to do better than their parents, they fear that if they are too successful one or both parents will become envious, and will reject or humiliate them. To deal with the ambivalence of both wanting and fearing success, they often underplay their accomplishments. But donning a cloak of invisibility works only until they become so successful that their accomplishments are noted.

As a good example of the Nobel Prize complex, consider Susan Larosse (name disguised), a senior executive working for a precision machinery company. From all appearances, her career progressed seamlessly until she was appointed country manager for China. Most of her previous jobs had been in staff positions, where, as an advisor, her counsel had always been highly appreciated. In her new position, however, Susan felt exposed, highly vulnerable and isolated. It was no longer sound advice that was expected from her, but shrewd action. Furthermore, she knew that she was in a
horse race for the position of CEO of the organization worldwide and thus was under close scrutiny. While in her previous positions there had been many people she could talk to, in her present one she felt increasingly isolated. Her growing sense of vulnerability made it difficult for her to make decisions, and that sluggishness began getting her into trouble. One of the senior officers at the head office even approached her, asking her why it took so long to take certain decisions. Susan didn’t know what to say, except to tell him that she needed time to understand the Chinese marketplace.

A leadership seminar gave Susan an opportunity to talk about her problems in a neutral forum. Feeling that one of the executive coaches who led the seminar was a good listener, she asked if she could explore these issues further with him privately. In those later conversations, the coach helped her distinguish between reasonable and unreasonable demands. He reminded her that she was in a transition phase and needed to be realistic about the time needed to be comfortable in her new position. He suggested that in every new position there are inevitable false steps, helping her understand that she was not alone in her dilemma. He explained to her that she needed to be less harsh on herself—less inclined to dwell on mistakes and more inclined to praise herself for her accomplishments. He helped her understand that mistakes are opportunities to learn and grow, not signs of diminished personal worth. He also made clear to her that although envy is an inevitable part of human life, her company was not the kind of place where people seethed with resentment when colleagues were successful.

As time went on, the coach helped Susan experiment with making decisions as she softened her all-or-nothing stance, accepting that life had far richer categories than simply “winners” and “losers.” He convinced her that her feelings of anxiety were in large part a result of emphasizing winning over enjoying the game. Putting his suggestions into action, she found that she achieved better results when she relaxed a bit and tried less hard. The coach also taught her how to be better at prioritizing and encouraged her to delegate more. To Susan, experimenting with and practicing these new insights gave a great sense of relief and led to a greater effectiveness in her work.

### The Monte Cristo Complex

The Monte Cristo complex is named after Alexandre Dumas’s book *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Set in the Napoleonic era, this novel tells the story of Edmond Dantès, a man sentenced to spend the rest of his days in the Château d’If (an infamous island prison) for a crime he did not commit. Betrayed by three jealous acquaintances, he is dragged off to prison on the eve of his marriage to the beautiful Mercedes. In prison he meets another prisoner, the Abbé Faria, who has begun digging a way out. He learns that the Abbé knows of a treasure hidden on the Isle of Monte Cristo. After escaping from the fortress, Dantès reappears some years later, having reinvented himself as the Count of Monte Cristo, with a complex plan to take revenge on his former enemies.

People who choose to deal with the hurts of childhood through vindictiveness and spite—and it is a choice, albeit an unconscious one—suffer from this complex. Although we all occasionally feel a desire to get even, for people who suffer from the Monte Cristo complex, revenge is more than a fleeting temptation; it is a way of life. Getting even is all that matters. It becomes more important, even, than such prizes as wealth and power.

People under the sway of the Monte Cristo complex have a great need to dominate others. Aggressive, irritable, and sometimes violent, they are masters of vindictive retaliation when opposed, and they often believe themselves to be immune to the consequences of their vindictive actions. With the memory of elephants, they rarely forget perceived hurts and insults. In fact, those hurts fester like an infectious disease of the mind. Like the Count of Monte Cristo, these individuals live for the “day of reckoning,” a
time when they will prove their superiority, put their enemies to shame and show the world how they have been wronged. And their enemies are many: believing that threats abound in this dog-eat-dog world, emulators of the Count of Monte Cristo have a vision of life as a battle and refuse to be seduced by traditional morality or their own softer feelings.

Although the Monte Cristo complex can be triggered by major life events (as it was for the Count), like most complexes its origin can generally be found in childhood. Typically, children learn vengeance in their family environment, as they are exposed to parental antagonism, vindictiveness and harassment. Children who grow up in such a family environment always have to be on guard. They learn firsthand about the survival of the fittest. Over time, out of self-defense, they begin to model themselves after their aggressive parents, first in the schoolyard and then in the corporate and political environment.

Well-known examples of the Monte Cristo complex in the political arena include Adolf Hitler, Slobodan Milosevic, and Saddam Hussein. In the corporate world we can find similar examples. John McFerson (name disguised), the CEO of an IT company can be viewed as a good example. His uninterrupted leadership, coupled with the fact that he owned a considerable amount of the company’s stock, gave him a tight grip on the organization.

By terms brilliant and intolerant, inspiring and frightening, persistent and ruthless, energetic and detached, John was seen as one of the more intriguing business leaders of a major 21st-century corporation. But, although he had great innovative and business skills, his leadership style and interpersonal manner left much to be desired. Former employees would tell horror stories about his arbitrary behavior. Even people who thought they were getting along well with John ended up being fired or being made to feel so uncomfortable that they chose to leave on their own account. Typically the excuses given for these firings were left quite vague. It seemed, however, that not much was needed before John felt threatened. A saying from Genghis Khan, “It’s not enough that I succeed; everyone else must fail,” had been so often used in the context of John that many people think it originated with him. Unable to tolerate executives who dare to stand up to him, he would regularly purge the organization’s senior ranks.

While John would not hesitate to fire employees, he always viewed voluntary departures from the organization as high treason. Seeking vengeance, he would play a central role in unseating former employees who he felt had spurned him. For example, after a former employee shifted allegiance to a competitor, John launched a hostile takeover attempt of that new firm that resulted in the firing of the former employee.

Likewise, there was no love lost between John and another one of his employees when the latter left to start his own company. Initially, the former employee’s new venture was a great success. In fact, the person even received the “Entrepreneur of the Year” award. When receiving the award, the former employee noted in his speech that he ran his company in a very different way than other companies in the area were run, which many listeners took to mean that he ran his company in a more ethical and professional manner than John’s firm. Given John’s vindictive, competitive streak, such a provocative comment was a suicidal flourish on the part of his former employee. Not long after that speech, John entered the same software market with a competitive product. The growth of his former employee’s company stopped as John’s firm ate into its market, resulting in a steep drop of the share price. Eventually John’s firm took over the company of the former employee offering a considerable amount of money, but a far cry from its valuation a number of years earlier.

The Troll Complex

There are two meanings of the word “troll” that play into the Troll complex. In Scandinavian folklore, trolls are mythical creatures that dwell in caves and hills. Ran-
ging from fiendish giants to human-like beings of the wilderness, they are often portrayed as ugly, obnoxious creatures bent on mischief. Today’s Internet trolls, on the other hand, “fish” for prey by “trolling”—that is, by drawing bait behind them. These trolls often post specious arguments or personal attacks to a discussion forum for no other purpose than to annoy someone or disrupt a discussion. These trolls are trying to “bait” other users into responding. They have no interest in making a real contribution and learning; rather, they want to sow discord.

These two types of trolls merge in the workplace in the form of the Troll complex. People suffering from the Troll complex are found in every organization. You can recognize them by their sour, negative outlook on life. Always whining and complaining, they expect the worst even in situations that are going well. They possess an irritable moodiness and an unaccommodating, fault-finding pessimism. Resistant to authority, they react to requests from above with procrastination, forgetfulness, stubbornness, intentional inefficiency, and lame excuses. Their passive-aggressive skills make them masters of organizational sabotage. Envious and resentful of authority figures and others seen as more fortunate, they see themselves as victims who never had a lucky break. Busy complaining that they are misunderstood, unappreciated, and victimized, they have little time or energy for constructive action.

People suffering from the Troll complex possess a repertoire of defensive reactions. For example, they are extremely talented at displacing their anger away from more powerful targets to safer ones—people who are less likely to reject them or retaliate against them. In addition, incapable of accepting blame for their own shortcomings, they externalize anything that bothers them. Although these people tend to be quite articulate in describing their discomfort, they rarely explore what is wrong or seek a solution to their difficulties.

Unfortunately, people who believe that they are misunderstood and unappreciated generally get confirmation of their outlook through the negative responses they receive from others, who are irritated by their defeatist attitude. Thus they are caught up in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because of their obnoxious behavior—and out of self-protection—other people avoid or minimize contact with them. As a result, troll-like people become socially isolated.

The origin of this kind of behavior can be found in endless power struggles of children with parents. Because the comparative helplessness of children makes it impossible for them to win in these situations, they adopt the face-saving technique of passive resistance as their tactic of choice. Parental over-control, neglect, or favoring of one sibling over the other all contribute to the development of a life strategy of passive resistance, silent protest and grudging obedience.

Trolls are most likely to be found in work settings where there are relatively few consequences for nonproductive behavior—in other words, organizations that are not performance-driven. For an example, let’s look at Peter Behr (name disguised), a senior researcher in a large government agency. A survey of Peter’s career trajectory suggests that he had reached a plateau. The commentary given by his superiors on performance reviews made it clear that more senior positions were unlikely to be open to him.

Although Peter was intellectually capable of producing brilliant research, he tended to waste his time in heated discussions with other executives in the organization, often getting worked up about trivial issues. He had a talent for making any meeting unproductive, creating stalemates and nitpicking every option presented. He was abusive of those beneath him, and he complained constantly about the incompetence and unfairness of the people senior to him. In his many run-ins with people at all levels of the organizations, he never acknowledged that his own behavior was contributing to the situation. Conversations initiated by people from the human resource department about his having an attitude problem produced no results: Peter always found ammunition to
blame others. Finally, mostly out of fatigue, his colleagues – including the superiors who had the clout to enforce change – let him be. They felt that it was just too much trouble to try to help him out of his self-dug hole, and firing him was seen as too much of a legal hassle.

The Faust Complex

One of the most durable legends in Western folklore is the story of Faust, the German scholar, astrologer and magician who sold his soul to the devil in exchange for greater knowledge and power. Although honored by the students who came from afar to learn from him, and revered by the townspeople to whose ills he ministered, Faust felt a strong sense of futility. In his quest for advanced knowledge and meaning, Faust summoned the devil (Mephistopheles), who offered Faust eternal youth, riches, knowledge and magical power in exchange for his soul. Faust agreed to this pact and signed away his soul. Some versions of the story have it that Faust met his tragic end when the devil came to claim his soul, while other versions say that he repented and was redeemed.

The various versions of this legend make it clear that Faust was bored. He had seen it all and learned it all, and nothing he knew or had experienced could get him out of his funk. He needed new challenges that would make him feel alive and new ways to amuse himself. It was fortunate that he found a person like Mephistopheles willing to help him out, even though the price was high. Not too high for Faust, though: apparently he thought it better to experience life to its fullest than to merely go through the motions.

Faust is not alone in trying to overcome boredom. Many people – and, more to the point for our purposes here, many executives – suffer from a similar problem. Nearly all of us have episodes of boredom, regardless of who we are or what we do. Contrary to popular belief, boredom is not a result of having nothing to do; rather, as in the Faust legend, it results when none of the possible things we can do appeals to us. Thus boredom is very much a subjective state of mind. What is boring to one person can be riveting to another.

In the workplace, all of us – either occasionally or often – face the challenge of dealing with assignments or situations that are repetitive and lack external stimulation. We may find ourselves bored by specific assignments, specific people, or an entire job. We may even be bored with ourselves, complaining that there is nothing that interests us. When boredom becomes a chronic, debilitating condition, however, we call it the Faust complex. Like Faust, such people have a hard time keeping themselves interested or entertained. After short periods of excitement when they encounter something new, every experience ends up seeming dull, repetitive or tedious.

To stay alert, all of us need constant sensory stimulation. When exposed to tedious situations, most of us cope with the help of fantasy and play. In our private, inner world we nurture fantasies about love, sex, success, happiness, material wealth and revenge. As we deal with a tedious chore, we are stimulated by those fantasies, along with images of past events and anticipation of future events. People with the Faust complex, however, seem to lack this rich kaleidoscope of inner imagery. Instead of being self-sufficient, they need the continuous stimuli of others to make them feel alive. Their fantasy life is stunted because of what appears to be a paucity of inner emotional experiences. Never having been able to stockpile adequate resources to cope with repetitive or otherwise tedious situations, they experience boredom as a cancerous growth that undermines the quality of their lives.

Organizations can be adversely affected by leaders suffering from the Faust complex. Such leaders often contribute to an organizational culture that lacks vitality and creativity. Alternatively, in some cases they turn to sensation-seeking to alleviate their feelings of boredom, creating an external environment that is varied and stimulating. That’s not bad in and of itself, but when sensation-seeking leads to substance abuse, gambling, ethical
trespassing, and other attempts at living on the brink, it is sure to have a disastrous effect on the organization.

The origin of the Faust complex can often be found in a one-sided parent–child interaction pattern whereby the parent takes all the initiative to stimulate the child; the child, a passive recipient of parental efforts, is not expected to show any initiative. Unfortunately, by taking over the so-called transitional space – that space where the child experiments with the free interplay of fantasy and reality – the parent deprives the child of the inner resources needed to self-stimulate. Without a satisfying inner fantasy life, the child needs to surround him- or herself with others for adequate stimulation, a pattern that turns into a lifelong struggle with boredom.

A good example of a person under the sway of the Faust complex is Paul Hearst (name disguised), who was the CEO of a luxury goods company. Years earlier, after completing his M.B.A., he had dreamed of becoming the CEO of a large corporation before the age of 45, and he surpassed that goal impressively. Given his golden touch in developing the luxury goods market, he was asked to take over the helm of the company at the age of 40. But now, having successfully built up the cosmetics business, Paul felt as if he were on automatic pilot. Boredom, an affliction he had been prone to all his life, was once more raising its ugly head. He had accomplished what he set out to do, but it gave him only a temporary high. Occasionally he wondered whether he been too successful, too soon. What else was there to strive for? His life felt meaningless. He had tried to deal with his boredom by experimenting with drugs, and he had even become entangled in a sordid affair, but all to no avail.

In an effort to rediscover a sense of meaning, he undertook a dramatic European expansion program with the help of a consulting firm. As the company’s debt skyrocketed, he realized that his attempt to bring excitement into his life was endangering the financial stability of the company. The situation was salvageable, fortunately, but Paul knew it was not something to be repeated. He had to find other ways to maintain a sense of freshness and excitement.

An opportunity to do something about his state of funk arose in the form of a leadership seminar that had executive renewal as one of its primary objectives. The seminar created the kind of transitional space that allowed Paul to explore his inner world and future challenges. In a safe forum where he could share with and learn from others, he began to experiment with fantasy, imagining other worlds he might conquer. The deep exchanges he had with the other participants helped him both understand himself and envision an alternative future for himself. In particular, a discussion with one CEO from Africa about poverty stuck with Paul. That conversation made him realize that he could use his considerable management talent to get a children’s hospital off the ground in one of the African countries. It would provide him a great opportunity, not only to use his formidable energy to do something dramatically new, but also to do something truly meaningful. Paul’s desire to engage in meaningful things turned out to be a powerful antidote to boredom.

COPING WITH COMPLEXES

So how can people find out if they have a complex? What are some of the indicators? And if a complex is identified in them, how can they deal with it?

While the specifics of each complex are different, we can watch for traits that all complexes share. For example, one way of recognizing that people are under the sway of a complex is their absolute determination that things have to be done in a certain way. Guided by an invisible, unconscious force, they try to inflict their way of doing things on others. When asked why, they cannot give a rational explanation; they state dogmatically that that’s the way it is. Their perspective is simply skewed. For example, some people look at any situation through rose-colored glasses, in spite of negative data (and with no attempt to argue away that data). Con-
versely, others predict a doomsday scenario in the face of optimistic evidence.

Another marker indicating that we are dealing with a complex is an excessive emotional reaction to certain situations. Because complexes are deeply rooted in childhood, events in the present can trigger recollection of important early incidents, causing the passion of those earlier events to flow into the present. Someone with the Monte Cristo complex, for example, on hearing a colleague’s minor criticism about some technicality, might perceive not a suggestion for improvement but an assault on his or her very being—and respond accordingly. That sort of passionate reaction is a surprise to others, of course, because they don’t share the same history and thus perceive the reaction as inappropriate. In addition, people under the sway of a complex are typically very insistent or passionate about certain issues or projects, an enthusiastic reaction that goes well beyond the merits of the case. They do not permit the usual give-and-take of normal discussions about those issues; indeed, due to their emotionality, they are no longer open to reason.

The good news is that if a complex is hampering effective action, distorting perception, complicating relationships, and interfering with our goals—if, in short, it is causing unnecessary pain and discomfort—we can change. We can learn to significantly lessen the influence a complex has on our lives. We won’t be able to obliterate it (complexes are too deep for that), but we can take back the power of choice and keep unconscious forces from completely running our life.

The first thing we have to do in coping with a complex is to identify its existence. That’s not easy, however. Just as fish don’t find the wetness of their surroundings remarkable because water is all they know, we don’t always notice an emotional muddle even when we’re smack dab in the middle of it. To arrive at a level of awareness, we generally need the help of one or more others—perhaps a friend, a family member, a therapist, a psychoanalyst or a leadership coach. These others may point out to us the driven nature of our behavior and show us where and how we have abandoned reason. If we pay attention to these observations, they can set into motion a process of self-exploration that will help us become more aware of the unconscious forces that dominate our being. That process will improve our emotional intelligence, provide greater insight into our motivations and help us understand what our specific complex is trying to accomplish.

That sort of understanding is critical to any personal change process, but it’s only the beginning of that process. As the saying goes: there is no gain without pain. Change takes time and effort. Being human, we will resist some of the observations that come at us from those helping us work towards change—after all, those people are questioning our habitual modes of being and relating—and we have to work through that resistance. Only when we understand the dysfunctionality of our complex can we “manage” it. If our resistances are particularly strong, we may need an emotional jolt (such as the jolt Paul Hearst felt when the Faust complex brought his company to the brink of financial ruin) to get this reflective process in motion. As we work through our resistances and make the unconscious conscious, we take decision-making control back into our own hands. By suffering our complexes consciously, we can restore to awareness the experiences on which the complexes were built, deal with those experiences reflectively and rationally, and thereby reduce their effect on us.

We can’t expect miracles, however. Complexes are too tenacious to ever be completely integrated into conscious awareness. There will always be a part of us that holds on to the complex, because after all these years it’s part of our identity. That continuity will keep us rooted, but we can change our perceptions by growing new branches. Even as those branches leaf and flourish, we will feel a sense of sadness, for the deadwood we leave behind us is a part of ourselves.
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The work by a number of writers of fiction can be very enlightening to find out in a more literary way what complexes are all about. For example, the novel by Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Vintage, 1991) is very helpful in obtaining a better understanding of this archetype. The novel *The Count of Monte Cristo* (New York: Barnes & Nobles Classics, 2004) by Alexandre Dumas, is a very elaborate description of the psychology of revenge and vindictiveness. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Faust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) is another example of a famous work of literature introducing the idea of psychological complex.

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