





Crisis Junkies

EXECUTIVES WHO THRIVE ON STRESS CAN BECOME EITHER TROUBLESHOOTERS OR TROUBLEMAKERS.

by Cheryl Waixel

Inside every one of us lurks a junkie who has an insatiable craving for cigarettes, chocolate, Gucci luggage, or Monday night football.

Some executives are hooked on crisis. For them, nothing can equal the “high” to be derived from single-handedly resolving problems that have no precedents, meeting impossible deadlines, pursuing lost causes, putting out fires of undetermined origin.

These men and women typically possess a combination of intelligence, know-how, intuition, street smarts, determination, and drive. There’s very little that they *cannot* do—except delegate and follow conventional rules. They don’t fit into preconceived bureaucratic molds or organizational charts, and they’ll rarely defer to a higher authority or allow a subordinate free rein.

Imbued with a sense of their own special worth and purpose, they view power as a necessary means to an end—so necessary that, unless they are able to function autonomously as top-level decision makers, these valuable *troubleshooters* may become *troublemakers*.

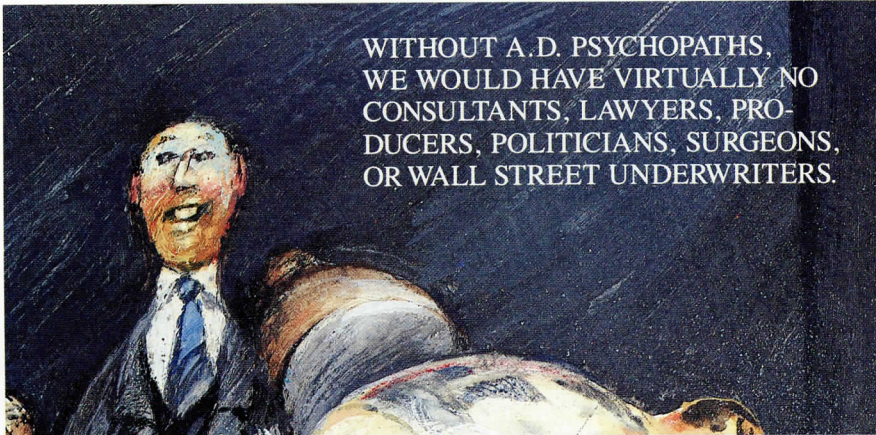
Controlling Interests

William E. Lord, vice president and executive producer of ABC-TV’s “World News Tonight,” is a typical troubleshooter. “I am responsible for *all* the decisions about this show,” he states emphatically. “The senior producers carry out those decisions. No one else—not even anchorman Peter Jennings, whose input is highly valued and frequently influences the broadcast form—makes a final decision on the line-up of news segments that will appear on the air. We generate the first line-up of the day at noon, and then do two or three revisions up until 5:20 P.M., which is our deadline for the seven o’clock broadcast. And, from the first line-up until the last, *I* make decisions—and decisions about those deci-

sions, constantly reevaluating which segments should be placed where, on the basis of their value and the overall pacing of the show."

He may sound egomaniacal, but Lord is in many ways a modest man. Although his resume looks like the top half of the Nielsen ratings—with stints as vice president and executive producer of "Nightline" and "Good Morning America" to his credit—Lord claims he was chosen for his present assignment because "I happened to be the available person with the right experience. I've made mistakes in all sectors, which I suppose has prepared me not to make too many mistakes on this job!"

Still, he has the overwhelming need for control that is one of the distinguishing traits of



the troubleshooter. According to Constantin Temcheff, an industrial psychologist based in Peat Marwick's Montreal office, "All troubleshooters are achievement-driven [A.D.] psychopaths, in the best possible sense. A.D. psychopaths cannot endure being dominated; they feel compelled to exert control over their immediate environment and associates in a variety of ways, which can range from appropriate to inappropriate. People who are just a little bit psychopathic make excellent troubleshooters and leaders.

"Without A.D. psychopaths, we would have virtually no consultants, lawyers, producers, politicians, surgeons, or Wall Street underwriters. These are all professionals who in the course of their daily lives introduce change and influence others. They are extroverted, but they are not necessarily sociable. These people give ulcers; they don't get them."

In fact, not only do troubleshooters seem impervious to the sort of pressure that might produce ulcers, hives, or headaches; they seem to crave it. "Deadline pressure is a motivating factor for me," admits Lord.

Orchestrating and Manipulating

"The trial lawyer who doesn't thrive on deadline pressure won't make it in this profession," agrees Barry I. Slotnick, one of three attorneys who have been retained to defend Bernhard Goetz, New York's "subway vigilante," against

charges of attempted murder.

Slotnick, who was cited by *The American Lawyer* magazine in 1981 for the best performance by a U.S. criminal attorney, has a penchant for taking on lost causes—and winning them. In one of his landmark cases, Slotnick defended two Hasidic Jews against charges that they had viciously assaulted a black teenager. The case hinged on the ability of eyewitnesses to identify the perpetrators. Therefore, with the judge's consent, Slotnick packed the courtroom with Hasidic men—all of them bearded and in traditional black garb—and seated his identically dressed clients among them. When the witnesses were challenged to point out the defendants, they were stymied. And the jury—on which there were seven blacks and no Jews—acquitted Slotnick's clients.

"You've got to be clever in this profession. You've got to stay one step ahead of everyone else," Slotnick comments.

"The best way to describe me is that I'm very intense. When I've got a trial date coming up I become compulsive about the case—obsessed by it; I've got to know every angle and every fact. And I give each trial everything I've got. During the last three-month court case I was on, I lost 20 pounds. It just drains me physically and emotionally. I'm like a prizefighter in the last round of a boxing match who's tired, but is always aware that he's got to be stronger and better than his adversary."

Slotnick admits that he chose his specialty because "You have greater command in criminal law. . . . Many of my clients are quite used to being in control of their usual lives, but when they come to me they are in trouble—and I make the decisions with no one to second-guess me."

Like other troubleshooters, he insists on autonomy. In fact, Slotnick left a job in a prestigious law firm the moment he had passed the bar in 1962 in order to start his own practice. The reason? "I didn't want people to give me direction when none was needed."

He rarely defers to anyone. "I have trouble with that," Slotnick says, with a glint in his blue eyes and a characteristic lopsided smile. "There's only one person a trial lawyer has to bow to—that black-robed man or woman who presides over a courtroom. But if a judge knows who you are, and respects what you do, even he will yield to your guidance."

What would he be if he weren't a lawyer? "I'd like to be the conductor of the New York Philharmonic," he muses. "To do something like that really well, you've got to be prepared. When you wave the baton, and the entire orchestra comes to life at your command, you literally have got to know the whole score. You've got the power to create something special, and you've got an audience to appreciate your performance." All in all, not so different from what he does now.

A Passion for Privacy

Interestingly enough, Slotnick describes himself as a private person. "When I'm not working, I disdain crowds and I don't like the limelight. Since my professional life is so exhausting, when I come home to my family I like to spend my time in a quiet, relaxed fashion with as few people as possible."

ABC-TV's Lord also likes to get away from it all when he leaves work. "I prefer my private life to be calm and predictable. Who needs excitement at home? I get enough of that at work. On a day off, I enjoy going sailing and being with my wife."

And James B. (who prefers to remain anonymous), executive vice president of a major diversified financial services organization, who is self-admittedly "driven" at work, describes himself as "a solitary person, not a joiner" on his own time. His hobby is furniture-making, a craft he believes is compatible with his individualistic approach to life: "I like to break new ground, to do my own thing. I've never had a job within the organization that anyone ever had before. I've always created my own positions and job descriptions. Designing furniture fits in with that need to accomplish and produce things that reflect my vision and philosophies."

James, who at age 61 looks and sounds a bit like a "young" John Gielgud to the untutored American eye and ear, was born and educated in Great Britain, and began his career in the comptroller's office in 1946. "By virtue of my upbringing, I was different from my American colleagues right from the start, and I guess I've capitalized on that difference throughout my career."

He believes he pulled off his first professional coup because he was in the right place at the right time. "In 1951, I was put on a job that had more to do with sales support than financial expertise. I would have gone crazy just working with dry statistics, but I just happened to be available when someone was needed to analyze how computers could be introduced to our organization—and I immediately realized what a big opportunity this could be."

"Instead of spending months deciding which type of computer to purchase, I just chose one. I don't have trouble making decisions. And because I was able to implement computers before anyone else, I kept this organization at the forefront of the industry."

"My conviction has always been that it's better to do something, to use your intuition and make a decision, than to waver and study the possibilities forever. Of course, I've been lucky, because I've had bosses who were willing to give me a great deal of autonomy, who believed in me and took a chance on me."

What kind of a boss is James? "On one level, I'm not so terrific," he says. "I have great trouble dealing effectively with people who don't grasp things as quickly as I do. I become impa-

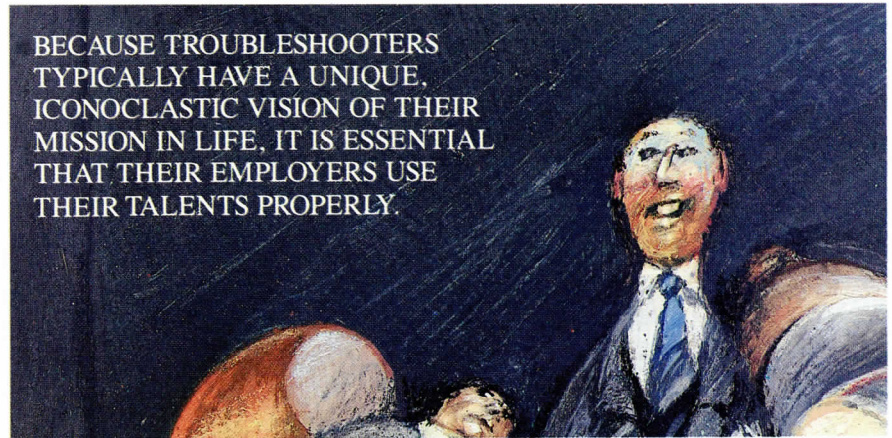
tient when long explanations are necessary."

He amends his first statement: "Actually, on *two* levels, I've got problems, because I also cannot abide yes-men and yes-women. I hope this doesn't sound arrogant, but I have my own distinctive vision of the world—and I need some people around me who see the world the way *most* people view it. My subordinates have got to be fearless about saying, "Yes, *but* you're not considering the way the rest of this organization is going to react to what you're doing."

Square Pegs in Square Holes

Because troubleshooters typically have a unique, iconoclastic vision of their mission in life and of the world around them, it is essential

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that their employers make every attempt to use their talents properly. Without proper outlets for their energy and ideas, troubleshooters can easily turn into troublemakers.

"If a highly energetic, independent person's efforts are channeled sufficiently, then he or she is apt to work toward the organization's goals, and become a troubleshooter," explains industrial psychologist Constantin Temcheff. "For example, a few years ago, Apple Computer took some potential troublemakers and put them in a room, and gave them a great deal of leeway so that they could create a new product. The rest is history: They invented the Macintosh computer."

"But in a bureaucratic organization, these same people—Steven Jobs among them—might very well have run into roadblocks and become troublemakers."

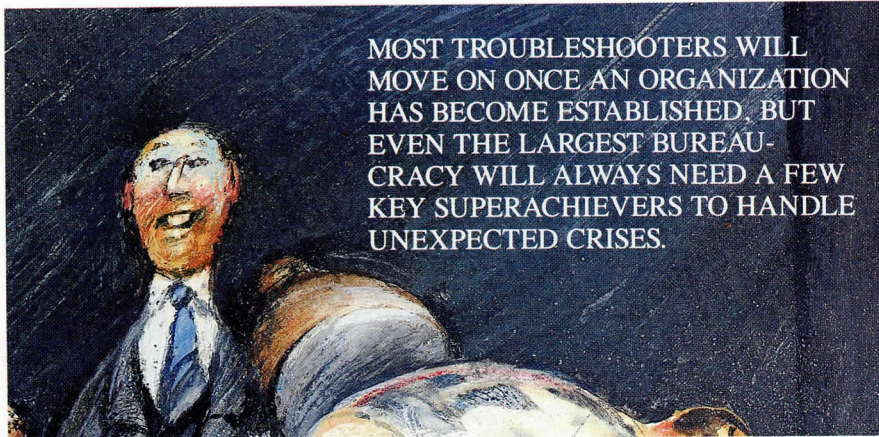
"These highly motivated individuals become frustrated, and isolated, when they have no outlet for their talents. They become meddlesome and start to fix what isn't broken."

"Thus, the challenge is for the organization not only to look at an employee's qualifications and talents, but to consider his or her personality, as well—and to use what might otherwise be *delinquent*, headstrong behavior to its advantage. To coin a phrase, when a company tries to put a square peg into a round hole, it's simply looking for trouble."

Robert W. Cuddy, a management consulting

principal in Peat Marwick's New York office who specializes in organization analysis and personnel services, points out that some organizations may have an easier time than others accommodating the needs of troubleshooters. "The central issue may be organizational maturity," he hypothesizes. "Most companies progress through five phases during a complete life cycle—start-up, growth, maturity, decline, and renewal. How long they linger in each phase will be contingent on management capability and the external market in which they compete.

"When an organization is in its start-up and growth stages, most of the staff has to have some of the personality attributes of the troubleshooter. The company's structure, process, and



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staffing are not yet fully defined, and employees must be able to take a great deal of initiative to get their jobs done. And, if something goes wrong, then the organization really needs its troubleshooters—people who won't hesitate to make a quick decision and put a finger in the proverbial dike. A lot of the new high technology companies are still in one of these phases."

However, Cuddy points out, the more mature an organization becomes, the more likely are the structure, process, and staffing to be etched in stone. Fewer and fewer troubleshooters are needed as the company becomes a recognized force in the marketplace. "This is when the troubleshooter—the individual contributor—starts getting *into* trouble, himself. He's a maverick who doesn't necessarily manage people or functions well, or delegate easily. He enjoys start-ups and turnarounds, but is restless within an established corporate culture."

Most troubleshooters will move on once an organization has become established, but even the largest bureaucracy will always need a few key superachievers to handle unexpected crises. "These key executives can be dispatched at a moment's notice to pull an account out of the fire, or to lobby for legislation, or to assess problems in a struggling subsidiary," says Cuddy. "They can cut through the layers of bureaucracy to find the problems and solve them. They are totally fearless when it comes to making difficult decisions, because they don't

worry about what the next guy is thinking. They don't fall back on old answers; they create new ones."

Maintenance-driven Neurotics Versus Achievement-driven Psychopaths

Assuming that every organization needs at least a few troubleshooters—and some need more than others—what part should this consideration play in the recruitment process?

And should a manager analyze his or her own personality type before hiring a troubleshooter as a subordinate?

Barry Slotnick thinks so. "I know that I need to be surrounded by a combination of people who are intense, and people who are exacting and methodical," he comments.

Slotnick's "intense" staff members are probably slightly psychopathic, based on Temcheff's definition. Conversely, employees who happily devote a great deal of attention to detail can be classified as maintenance-driven neurotics. Some jobs, even within the same profession, should clearly be assigned to a certain personality type. For example, according to Temcheff, recruiters should seek neurotic personality types for medical research jobs, and psychopathic types for hospital administration.

What about jobs that require *both* attention to detail and the ability to exercise power? "It's a problem finding the right candidates to fill these slots," Temcheff admits. "And there are a lot of cross-over type positions. Take the case of a bank teller, who must handle the public while keeping track of cash flow; or of a secretary, who must politely route the traffic in and out of the boss's office while typing faultless letters."

In addition, Temcheff asserts that the skills that are highly valued in some entry-level professional positions are not essential to management and leadership a few years down the road. "The accounting profession is a good example," he says. "Leadership skills are simply not rewarded during an accountant's first few years in a firm. Apprentice accountants must exhibit a neurotic attention to detail; and the very employees who get poor performance reviews early on—because they are A.D. psychopaths—may be executive material. When you're looking for potential executives, you're not going to pick the people who are simply consummate numbers crunchers."

Of course, even standout troubleshooters are apt to be just a tiny bit neurotic. Says ABC-TV's Lord, "I strive to be a perfectionist, but under deadline constraints I've also got to be pragmatic. Two out of five nights a week I'm pleased, because I know I did a better job than the competition. The other nights? Well, it hurts a lot when you blow it, but the only way to eliminate mistakes is to stop taking chances—and I'm not about to do that." ■

This article has been excerpted from Crisis Junkies, a book in progress.