



# The Invisible Drain on Your Company's Culture

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By Mark Scullard, PhD

# Every single one of us struggles with insecurity.



In fact, we do it every single day of our lives, even when we don't realize it. What we realize even less, however, is just how much this insecurity eats away at our organizational cultures. But if we can help people own their personal quirks and if we can help them extend that same good will to their colleagues, we can cultivate a counteragent: a culture of trust. And luckily, organizations actually can reliably create experiences that bolster this sort of trust. This eBook will explore one time-tested methodology for doing so: personality-based assessments.

# Drains on Culture



Think about all of the bad habits that are a drain on your company culture, drip by drip by drip. Let's see. There's gossip, territorialism, cliques, cynicism, defensiveness, hiding mistakes, resistance to change, fear of risk, passive-aggressive communication, avoiding feedback, withholding of information, false consensus, pocket vetoes, and that was when we were all together in the same workspace. It's not hard to imagine how some of these bad habits can quickly escalate when we're isolated and working from home. So what's behind this grab bag of dysfunction? Probably a lot, but there is, in fact, one root cause behind all of them.

## Human insecurity.

Not just the passing of self-doubt, but that fundamental conflict each of us has struggled with since the time we

had that first sense of self, the core question that takes the basic shape of, "Am I a good, valuable person?" It's a question that I've helped countless clients work through as a therapist, but the fear it generates has just as much relevance for my work as an organizational psychologist.

In fact, it's such a raw fear that we usually push it well outside our awareness. It's just too much to deal with on a regular basis. And if asked the question directly, we give the answer that pop psychology has been training us to give since we were a preteen, "Of course I know I'm a good person!" Any other response means we suffer from low self-esteem, and that's an unacceptable sign of weakness—or at the very least, a symptom that we've failed to meet those basic developmental milestones that society has set out for us. "Weak" and "fail" being key words.

# Insecurity is the Human Condition



But this mentality, although widely encouraged, is so superficial and out-of-touch, it's almost as if it was devised by an extra-terrestrial—one who had never had the experience of actually living as a human being. By contrast, the concern over our fundamental value and goodness is one that never goes away. Besides the concern for our physical safety, there is nothing we are more instinctually wired to worry about. **Insecurity is the human condition**, so much so that if you don't have any insecurities rumbling around in your head, you probably have a different, much more serious condition.

And yet, at work we pretend that insecurity is something we should have outgrown, a leftover of adolescence. When we do mention it, we regard it as a character flaw. We treat insecurity as an insult or as a way of dismissing someone. "Oh, they're just acting like that because they're insecure."

Insecurity is dismissed as a weakness. And the best word I can think to describe this attitude is malignant. Because it causes us to pretend insecurity is not there. That it shouldn't be there. To not talk about it. Not acknowledge it. **The universal is treated as an anomaly.**

But is there a single person you know who doesn't have significant insecurities? If you said yes, it's probably because you don't actually know them that well. Insecurity is not some holdover from adolescence that we weren't strong enough to deal with when we should have. It is a struggle for even the most enlightened among us. I recall, for instance, developing a program on conflict with my team and interviewing a variety of extremely accomplished, sophisticated professionals about their personal experiences with the topic.



Specifically, we wanted to know about their internal monologue when they were in the midst of a fight. From the very first interview, it was immediately clear that the real fight was a battle against these core insecurities. They all described an internal struggle between reason (what the mature, healthy, Oprah-informed part of them knew to be true) and insecurity (the little insidious voice that questioned their worth and compelled them to defend it by any means necessary, no matter how destructive in the long-term). And these were self-actualized individuals who had spent decades reflecting on their real motivations and making themselves aware of the unconscious forces that were a drag on their development.

But this is just a personal issue, right? It doesn't (or at least shouldn't) affect how you do your job. You've

got to work through your baggage on your own time. Get a therapist, or if you can't afford a therapist, at least get a cat or a fidget spinner. Except insecurity has everything to do with how we do our jobs. Unless your workplace is a bunch of networked hard drives mining for bitcoins, it's probably filled with humans. And these humans bring their personal issues into your workspace every single day. They don't just bring their current problem—their mother with dementia, their hypercritical spouse, their troubled teenager—they also bring a lifetime of critical experiences (e.g., growing up with an emotionally withholding father, being the target of a rumour on their first job out of school, getting passed over for a promotion they always knew they weren't good enough for). Both our experiences and our genetics have programmed us to habitually worry about our place in the world.

# Insecurity and the Erosion of Culture



And a big part of that world is our workplace. So, when there's a hint that someone might be encroaching on our unique contribution to the organization, we make sure they don't have access to certain information (i.e., territorialism). When someone's offhanded sarcastic comment makes us think they don't value what we do, we disparage them to a coworker (i.e., gossip).

When we worry that we'll be labeled combative if we don't agree with the team's decision, we keep our mouth shut (i.e., false consensus). Drip by drip by drip, these actions slowly, and usually imperceptibly, corrode the machinery of the organization's culture—a steady drain on efficiency, communication, transparency, engagement, creativity, and objective decision-making. And, of course, all of this trickles down to the bottom line, even if that trickle is so slow that it oozes under the radar. For instance, when people don't share information or ask for help or speak up about problems in meetings, decisions suffer and the bottom line takes a hit. When people feel

they're constantly being judged or second-guessed or marginalized, tenure suffers and the bottom line takes a hit. When people fear speaking up with an idea or taking a risk or challenging a bad solution, innovation suffers and the bottom line takes a hit. Small, subtle behavioral nudges that build to have a real impact.

The corrosive effects of unmanaged insecurity, however, are so normal, so pervasive that they're almost invisible. A fish doesn't know it's in water. We manage our insecurity and the insecurity of the people around us on a weekly, if not daily basis, most of the time without noticing it. We consider who can't be left out of a meeting because they might feel slighted. We redo a coworker's task rather than give them candid feedback. We include an exclamation mark in an email so the tone comes across as more friendly. We even reorder the recipients of that group email so that certain people won't feel like an afterthought.



When you prepare to enter the workforce, no one ever tells you just how much of your life is going to be spent managing insecurity and its consequences. If you're going to be an architect, they tell you about the types of tasks you'll be doing. Or if you're applying to be a claims adjuster, they give you a sense that this is what your day will look like. But no one pulls you aside and says, "Listen, there is going to be an entire layer of your day, pretty much every day, that will be about managing your and other people's insecurity. And the more you work with people, the more this is going to be part of your life. In fact, it will be so common that you won't even notice it."

Of course, most modern leaders recognize the impact of the interpersonal and even the intrapersonal on their organization's success. With each generation of executives, there is more acknowledgment of the

humanity of their workforce and the need to be mindful of this variable. Even if they don't know where their attitudes have come from, most managers have come a long way from the pure, impersonal application of Taylorism. There are sincere efforts to ensure a sustainable work-life balance. Virtual team coffee and recognition events acknowledge the employees' basic need for camaraderie and appreciation. If you work in a tech start up, maybe you also get a ping-pong table, a trampoline, and a community poodle. And this stuff is great, but the deeper human issues that chip away at our cultures are, of course, very complex and messy. And because they're messy (and perhaps because they're perceived as adolescent), they get ignored. We ignore an issue that is so obvious and ubiquitous that in any other context, the practice would be regarded as negligent.

# A Matter of Trust



By analogy, if you have a car, even if you're like me and you assume cars partially run on magic, you probably do at least know that your oil is eventually going to wear down and deteriorate, and that if you don't address it, it will eventually cause inefficiencies, maybe even a breakdown. Likewise, if you have humans working in your company, insecurity is going to introduce inefficiencies and perhaps even toxins into your organization. It's going to gunk up the works to some meaningful degree. The difference is, we acknowledge that the oil is a legitimate issue that regularly needs to be addressed. No one thinks it's a good idea, or even an option, to pretend an oil change is not a real concern. Insecurities, on the other hand, we ignore as either a non-issue, or as a minor nuisance, or, at most, as a natural occurring condition that we simply have to work around. That is, we can take steps to significantly increase the level of trust in our cultures—whether your employees are working from home, back in the office, or somewhere in between.

**But there is something we can do about it. We can encourage trust. That is, we can take steps to significantly increase the level of trust in our cultures.**

For more than 15 years, Patrick Lencioni's *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* has been on Amazon's best sellers list. The foundation of his model for building cohesive, high-functioning teams is trust. And there are multiple methods to do this, but one he and his team have been using consistently for decades is an intense group discussion around personality assessment results. He writes:

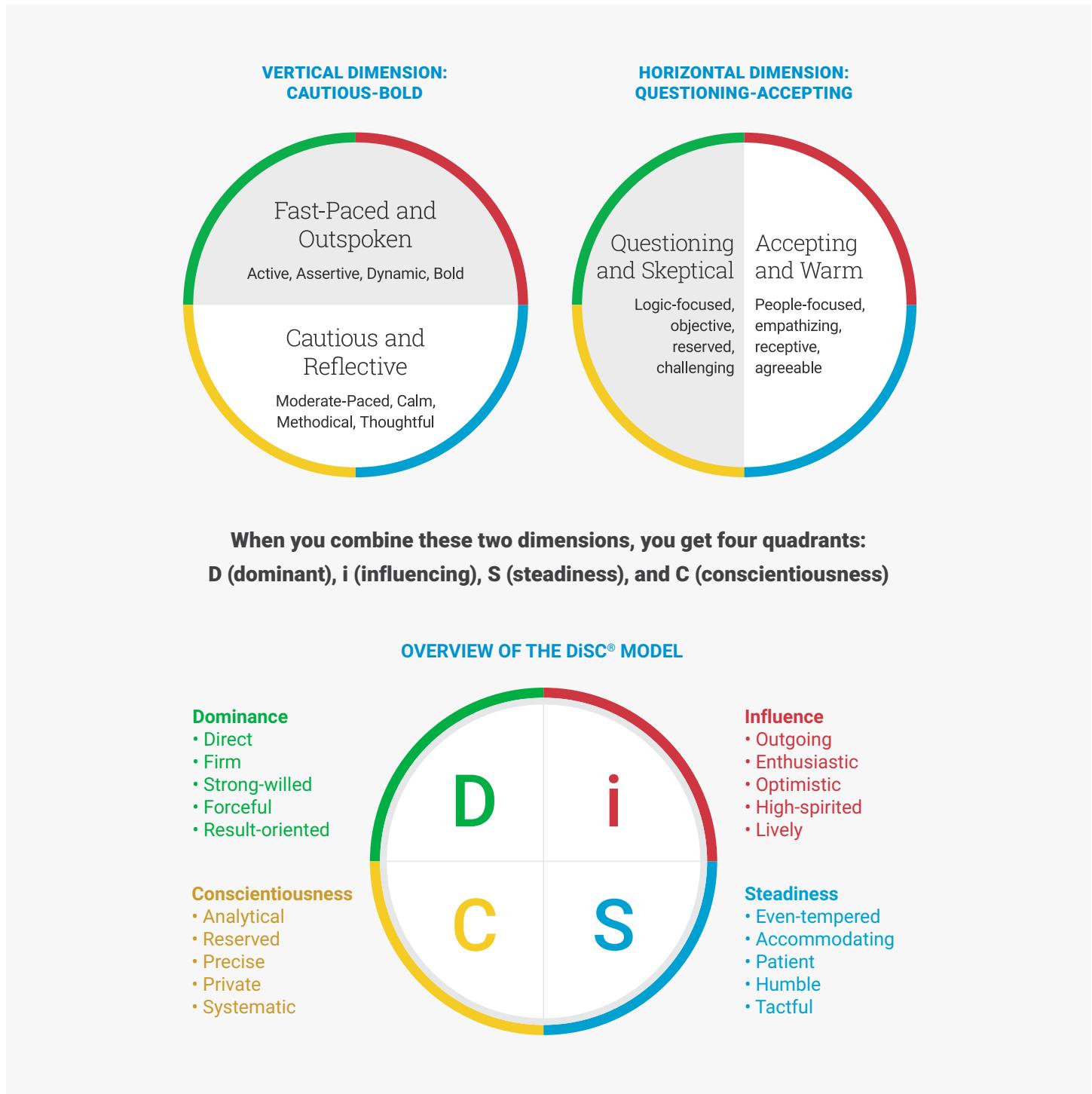
**"Some of the most effective and lasting tools for building trust on a team are profiles of team members' behavioral preferences and personality styles. These help break down barriers by allowing people to better understand and empathize with one another."**

Having worked extensively with one such tool, DiSC®, for the past fifteen years, I want to take a little bit of time here to unpack exactly why this personality-driven approach to trust building is so effective at mitigating those ever-present insecurities that, if unchecked, will drip by drip sap our cultures of their vitality.

# Personality-Based Learning Experiences That Build Trust

To provide some context, here's a quick primer on the Everything DiSC® model. It describes two very fundamental dimensions of human nature. First, some people are more fast-paced and outspoken, while other

people are more cautious and reflective. Second, some people are naturally more skeptical and questioning, whereas other people are more accepting and warm.



After completing a 15 minute online assessment, a person receives a report that describes where they fall within the DiSC® model and what that means for their work and their relationships. Of course, the process can end here. The person reads their report and thinks, "This is creepy...have these people been cyber stalking me?" They walk away with a deeper understanding of themselves and a crisp framework to organize interpersonal relationships. But in my experience, this person is probably only taking away a fraction of richness that such a tool has to offer. The value that exists in a profile like this most fully comes to life when a person experiences their results in a facilitated learning session, either in-person or virtual.

So why is the facilitated learning session so valuable? Let me compare it to another intervention that hopes to inspire change in the individual—therapy. One of the classic approaches to therapy involves creating what is called a corrective emotional experience. That is, unlearning an emotional lesson is almost impossible to do purely through reflection and insight. And so the strategy is to create an environment with the therapist that is healthy so that the person can be vulnerable and instead of the anticipated negative occurrence the person emotionally expects, the person has a positive experience. Slowly, by doing this over and over again the emotional brain rewrites the rules of the world, the rules that govern relationships. As a result they're able to grow.

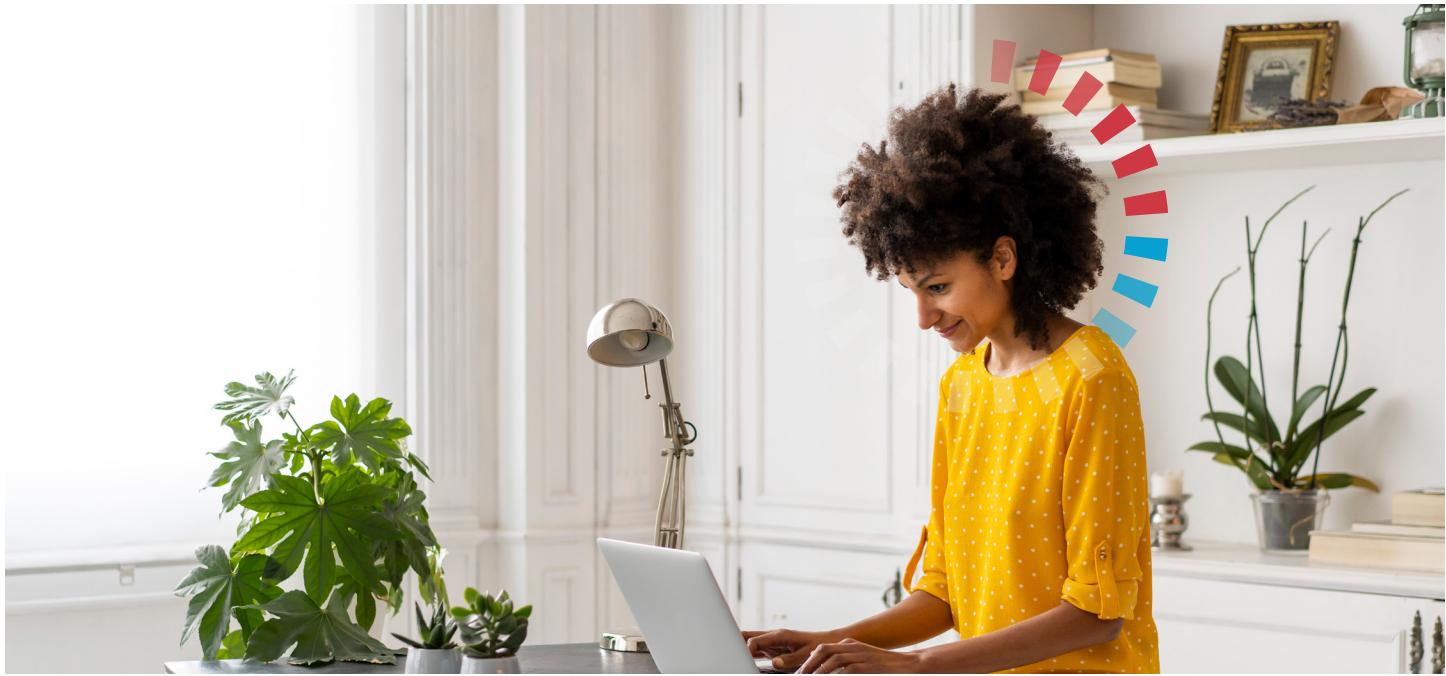
The experience a person has in the session is a less intense version of this process. To be clear, it's definitely not therapy, but it does create an event where a person can learn not just intellectually, but also emotionally that it's alright to be vulnerable around these people they work with.

For instance, imagine a very private, analytical database administrator. In the session, she gets a chance to share with her colleagues some of the ways that she fears that she's misunderstood—that there's a difference

between being reserved and being cold, that she likes being asked to go out for lunch even if she doesn't initiate, that her matter-of-fact delivery doesn't mean she assumes she knows best. Not only does she get a chance to express, but she also gets to see other people listening and processing what she's saying, the kind of things we rarely have a non-awkward chance to say in our daily work. And just as powerful is hearing other people describe what they appreciate so much about her contributions—she follows through, she can be counted on for an unbiased opinion, she projects calm when things are frantic. It's by hearing other people talk about their appreciation of her style that she internalizes the message, "I am valued here." It's by witnessing other people talk about the struggles they also have with their style that she internalizes the message, "I'm not alone in my insecurity." It's by experiencing, firsthand, how the different styles need each other to succeed that she internalizes the message, "Different doesn't equal bad."

**The highest value in assessments such as Everything DiSC® is not getting a precise description of your personality, or even getting personalized tips on how you can grow (although these things are powerful), but the real magic is the insights and "aha" moments that happen in the sessions and get carried forward onto the job.**

The consumer insights department at Wiley, the publisher of Everything DiSC®, does a great deal of research into the participant experience, both quantitative and qualitative. Interviewing people after the fact, when we ask, "what was the most valuable thing that came out of the training?" they describe a fundamental shift in how they view their colleagues. It is people seeing each other as three-dimensional human beings with very understandable flaws and quirks—flaws and quirks that sometimes impacted the way they worked. Flaws and quirks that they could now accept with much greater depth, partially because they knew they themselves would also be the recipients of such grace.



These experiences create a space for people to be vulnerable with each other. And for some of these people it might be a first time in their adult working lives that they've had a space like this. For a smaller subset, it might be the first time they've ever had access to a space like this ever. It's where people can grow not only through cerebral or cognitive means, but by speaking to their instincts, where slowly their gut is telling them that maybe it's okay for me to be flawed around these people. Maybe all that nonsense about criticism just being feedback was more than just a cliché. That they'll not only survive the feedback, but they'll be happier for it. That their flaws don't define them. That maybe I can start to let go of a few of my insecurities with these people, and if not let go, maybe at least loosen my grip a little bit.

**And by doing this, we slowly liberate a tremendous amount of energy in the workforce. And passion. And potential. Assets that had previously been covered up by layers of emotional clutter.**

Of course, these experiences don't just happen if you throw a group of people together with their personality profiles. We are attempting to connect humans on a more human level and that requires some nuance and finesse. It requires someone who can help guide

discussions, push people to open up, and recognize when the language of personality is being misused. These experts can also help customize the virtual and in-person facilitated training session to fit the needs of a particular culture. Wiley's been lucky throughout the decades to partner with thousands of these coaches, consultants, and trainers—not only to hear their insights about what works best, but also to create events together that can genuinely transform a culture.

Of course, there isn't just one way to address the hidden, but ever-present toll that insecurities take on our efficiency and effectiveness whenever two or more humans attempt to work together for any length of time. None of the available solutions are cure-alls and none of them are effortless, but perhaps that is why they can create such a competitive advantage for an organization, especially now when insecurities amongst employees are heightened. Because, ultimately, when we help individuals, teams and organizations create a trustworthy environment (that is, an environment that's worthy of their trust), we free those human beings up to engage and connect with each other more fully, more authentically, to ultimately contribute their hearts, minds and talents to something worthy of their energy.

Everything DiSC® is a global leader in delivering personalized, soft skills learning experiences that have an immediate and lasting impact on the performance of people and cultures of organizations. To discover how Everything DiSC can inspire meaningful culture change in your organization, connect with your Everything DiSC Authorized Partner today.

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