

THREAT LEVEL: RED **PSYCHOLOGICAL FORCES** **AT WORK**

How we unintentionally set off each others' threat alarms,
and make our business relationships harder than they have to be.

By: Dr. Martin D. Cohen &
William R. Stark
Partners, Maverick LLC
www.maverickllc.com
866-688-7223 x 706

Threat Level: Red, Psychological Forces at Work will help you to better understand and interact with the people in your business world-both internal and external to your organization. Once you understand the principles examined in Threat Level Red, Psychological Forces at Work, and adopt our top ten Threat Level Red training points, we are certain that your business and your personal relationships will improve, and the outcomes of your negotiating efforts will be more successful. You will even find that your personal relationships will be less stressful and more satisfying once you adopt the principles in this article.

If any part of your job involves managing, directing, negotiating or just working with other people, then you have certainly seen many work-place behaviors that did not make sense to you. That's because these everyday occurrences are rooted in the fact that much of human behavior is not sensible or logical, but instead, is motivated by powerful and primitive biological and psychological forces. And even though we may wish it were not the case, our own behaviors, along with those of our colleagues and customers (and friends and loved ones too), will continue to be driven by these unseen psychological

forces – a fact not often taught or even mentioned in graduate school business programs -
- **forces we would do well to better understand.**

Although human evolution has given us the technical know how to get us to the moon, to Mars and even beyond our own solar system, core elements of our ancestors' survival instincts remain. These primitive reactions cause us to unknowingly threaten or be threatened by our peers, colleagues, bosses and subordinates: and although they are almost always unintentional, these behaviors are responsible for myriad business and personal relationship break downs. And more often than not, we are at a loss to understand what happened.

***Threat Level: Red**, *Psychological Forces at Work* provides the reader with a brief historical perspective on why we still retain psychological traits similar to those of our caveman ancestors. And once we understand why we are the way we are, we will provide demonstrative, real world scenarios where indirect and unintentional threats have undermined otherwise successful business and personal relationships. Once these historical and present day behaviors become recognizable, we'll look at how you can create your own solutions that you can employ toward building and keeping successful business relationships.*

THE THREAT 50,000 YEARS AGO -- IN THE CAVES

We all live in the bodies of our ancestors; those early humans whose bodies reacted to the saber tooth tiger at the cave entrance by immediately becoming combat ready – they were the ones who survived and passed their genetic tendencies on to us. And what about the others who needed to stop and think about getting their bodies ready to fight or flee? They were lunch. Our biology has us hardwired to react immediately to threats; this phenomenon is known as the fight - flight reaction.

There is literally a part of each of us that acts like a 911 dispatcher -- monitoring all stimuli that reach us, and deciding whether or not to sound the alarm to action. The mere perception of a threat triggers in us a sudden, powerful cascade of chemical and physiological changes. Among these reactions: our muscles tense up in preparation for an attack; our blood flow is rerouted -- more to our big muscles increasing our endurance to fight or run, and at the same time, arteries carrying blood to our digestive system and to our skin contract, so there is less blood flow in case we are scratched or bitten and therefore are less likely to bleed out; our pupils dilate to let in more light -- useful when we lived in caves.

Because survival is the primary goal of our biology, there is a strong, natural predisposition to err on the side of danger -- to get our bodies ready for combat just in case it is necessary. You know what we mean if you've ever found yourself walking alone late in the evening, on a dimly lit street and with no one else in sight; and then, suddenly you become aware of the sound of footsteps coming up behind you, getting louder and louder. At that moment you probably became aware of how quickly your heart started pumping faster and how you could feel the surge of adrenaline through your body, and how your muscles tensed; all preparing for danger that never materialized, as the nicely dressed middle aged man passed you by.

THE THREAT 50,000 YEARS LATER -- AT THE OFFICE

We share this flight-flight reaction with most other creatures. There is, however, another aspect of human functioning that sets us apart; that is our ability to not only perceive and process data through our senses, but to perceive and process *concepts* --the world inside our heads, so to speak. Our thoughts, our interpretations, our imagined scenarios, all these mental events make up our conceptual world, and they are every bit as real to us as is the sensory world, and our survival wiring is just as responsive to conceptual threats as to sensory ones; in fact, our biology doesn't distinguish at all between threats we see or hear from the outside and the ones we conceptualize on the inside.

The way our biology has us respond to any threat, physical or psychological, is to get our bodies ready for the anticipated physical demands of fighting or fleeing. Just think of the last time you found yourself with muscle tension or developed a headache or digestive system upset the night before meeting the new boss, or maybe, just prior to delivering a major presentation. These are biological responses to threats we perceive at the conceptual level, not threats to our physical well-being. These common physical symptoms are the result of a misdirected cascade of physiological changes designed to meet the demands of a threat to our body, even though it may be only our ego that is under attack. Most of these physiological changes take place outside of our own awareness, and, unless the building is on fire, none of them are useful at the office. These biological adaptations help if we need a burst of speed or strength in a physical challenge. But they are counterproductive if we are at the computer working on a report or spreadsheet, or trying to think through a strategic business decision, or trying to get someone to see something our way.

In our conceptual world, the key to survival is being right. We make our way in the world through those values, principles, interpretations, and meanings in which we believe and that we hold as “right”. And, because of our biological makeup, when our rightness is threatened, we react just as defensively as our ancestors did to the crouching tiger at the cave entrance.

BEING MADE TO FEEL WRONG IS ALMOST ALWAYS PERCEIVED AS A THREAT

In addition to these biological responses to feeling threatened, psychologists have also identified numerous psychological responses we experience in reaction to a threat. These automatic and unconscious defensive maneuvers, such as denial and rationalization, known as defense mechanisms, all rearrange our initial perceptions in order to reduce threats to our self-concept or ego, just as we might consciously rearrange details of a story in order to get out of a threatening situation. We will do whatever it takes to survive in both the sensory and the conceptual worlds. Survival, instinctively, is more

important than truth. And, most important for our current discussion, if someone is diverting energy into escalated defensive reactions, and away from dealing with what is, their usefulness in virtually any other task, (e.g., listening, making important decisions, negotiating) is further reduced. For those *Star Trek* fans, how many times have we heard Chief Engineer Scott tell Captain Kirk when the spaceship was in danger, “We can't shift into warp speed, Captain, because too much energy is going into the deflector shields”? As it is with the starship Enterprise, so it is with us.

Let's take a look at some real-life examples that we use in our corporate training scenarios to discover how insidious and subtle these dynamics can be, and how a skillful application of new understanding can prevent relationship disasters.

Josh, a newly recruited marketing manager, was tasked with crafting a product strategy for his new boss, Susan. The request was a prestigious assignment for the new manager, and was going to be used as the keystone of his boss' presentation at her next executive staff meeting.

The work took two weeks of laborious and stressful twelve hour days, but in the end, Josh was extremely pleased with the finished product-- and he was sure that Susan would be, too. A couple of days after he submitted his work product, he was delighted to receive an invitation from Susan to come by her office and brief her on the new strategy he had created. To Josh's surprise, already sitting in the office with Susan was one of his new coworkers; Burt was another marketing manager at the same level as Josh, but had been reporting to Susan for quite a while. After Susan and her managers exchanged a few pleasantries, Burt began to throw a slew of questions at Josh regarding the new product strategy that he had produced for Susan.

The questioning consisted of Burt drilling many layers down into the sources and accuracy of certain data in Josh's presentation; he also sought numerous explanations from Josh as to the logic behind several of his key analyses and conclusions. While this was going on, and despite the fact that Josh was able to easily qualify and substantiate

his sources and the facts presented in his strategy document, Susan just sat there quietly, listening intently and sometimes just nodding her head throughout the often contentious and argumentatively driven discourse. When Burt finished what was perceived by Josh as nothing less than an inquisition, Susan said nothing to Josh of Burt's questioning; and instead, simply thanked both of them for coming as she walked them out of her office. In the ensuing weeks, Josh became argumentative in staff meetings and overtly hostile to Burt, as well as distancing himself from other managers in his group, too. And, Josh's morale and motivation to do his job deteriorated significantly over the subsequent weeks and months. What had happened to Josh?

The Threat to Josh Was Only A Perception, But Perception Is Our Reality!

In preparing the product strategy, Josh assumed that his work would be reviewed solely by Susan, and so, the unanticipated questioning by Burt, aggravated by Burt's abrasive style, was almost immediately perceived by Josh as a threat—to his competency, his credibility and to his relationship with his new boss, Susan. Burt's line of questioning, and his tone and attitude contributed to Josh's perception that in the eyes of his coworker and, more importantly, in the eyes of his new boss, he had done things wrong.

What Josh had no way to know, since he had just started reporting to Susan, and no one told him, was that her management style was typically to rely upon her managers to review each others' work; and she encouraged critical thinking among them by promoting this type of one-on-one interaction. Without that prior knowledge about Susan, Josh misinterpreted what was meant by his coworker, Burt, to be a helpful and constructive critical thinking exercise as hostile and mean-spirited criticism, and came away from that meeting believing that such behavior was the norm in the department under his new boss. Josh further rationalized that since the other manager's behavior appeared to be viewed favorably, he should start acting likewise. However, this new, more aggressive behavior was so contrary to Josh's natural, non-confrontational style, that it took a severe toll on him. His internal conflict manifested itself in several ways, including lowered morale

and job satisfaction, reduced productivity and creative thinking, physical aches and pains, and even increased discord at home.

The damaged relationships between Josh and Susan, as well as with his colleague, Burt, and the other managers, took considerable professional coaching to sort out. Both managers were highly experienced and valued by Susan, so losing either of them was not an option. In 20/20 hindsight, it is easy to see that better options were available. For example, had Susan explained that part of her management style included face-to-face peer review to facilitate critical thinking, Josh would likely have felt much less threatened by his colleague. That in turn would have made it easier for Josh to retain his natural behavioral style instead of trying to adapt to what he felt was a more aggressive and confrontational style within his new group. And, if Susan had invested just a little additional time and energy indoctrinating Josh, and all other new members to her team, her department would not have incurred significant delays in product development due to lost productivity caused by conflict among her staff; and the additional costs in both time and money spent repairing many fractured relationships.

**THE OSTRICH APPROACH WORKS—
BUT ONLY IF THE THREAT GOES AWAY**

Steve is a consultant for a large, well known consulting firm, Smartest People In The Universe, who finally got to meet with Jill, the senior vice president of operations for a global consumer goods company, with the hope that he could persuade Jill to engage his consulting firm for a very large project. Going in, Steve felt confident about the eventual outcome of his sales pitch. After all, he had many years of hands-on management experience in operations similar to Jill's, and he had extensively researched her company's operating history, including speaking with several executives who had recently left the company, and who told him about the significant and virtually intractable problems that were plaguing management—including Jill. In addition to believing that he was a more experienced professional, Steve had done his homework well, and felt certain that there were several areas in which he could demonstrate the

significant value that Smartest People In the Universe could bring to Jill, and that he could also show how the resulting cost savings to Jill's company would allow it to amortize the expense of the engagement, albeit a very large sum, within a year's time.

As you would expect, once in the meeting, Steve controlled the conversation, and spoke passionately and knowledgeably about the current operating and revenue problems that were impeding the growth and profitability of Jill's division, including the seemingly constant reorganizations that were hurting recruiting and retention—which in turn were delaying new sales and eroding existing customer confidence..

To close the deal with Jill, he explained exactly what the Smartest People in the Universe could bring to the table, and how they would assist Jill. Steve made some preliminary but detailed recommendations as to what Jill should and could be doing differently. Armed with a most impressive and convincing Power Point presentation, Steve thought he was making great inroads with Jill. More than two hours later, his presentation complete, he flipped his laptop shut, tucked his state-of-the-art projector into his company branded leather computer case, and enthusiastically and sincerely thanked Jill for her time.

As he finished packing his documents and computer, Jill paid Steve several compliments about his knowledge and presentation, and agreed to review the proposal in detail, and follow-up by phone the very next week. As Steve left the building for the parking lot, he was grinning ear to ear, and he was confident that he would receive a positive response from Jill that would result in a very sweet engagement for Smartest People In The Universe, and a huge commission for himself. How you think Steve made out?

I don't see you, I can't hear you. And mostly I'm never going to respond to you!

The response from Jill to Steve's proposal came in well south of Steve's worst expectations. In fact, Jill never followed up as promised and Steve had no luck getting Jill on the phone or by e-mail. Even Jill's administrative support people did not respond to Steve's attempts to contact *someone in the office* that could get him to Jill.

When we first spoke with Jill about this situation, she categorically denied that Steve's proposal would have provided any additional value to her own efforts for the turnaround. But after asking her a few, non-threatening, open ended questions, along with some gentle prodding; subsequent feedback from Jill revealed something quite different from her original report. She reluctantly admitted that even though Steve's ideas were well thought out, and could have been of significant value to her division -- indeed, to the company as a whole, it was his attitude that turned her off to him. Jill told us, "He talked to me like I worked for him. He made me feel like I didn't know what I was doing, so there was no way I was going to retain him or his firm".

So, even though Steve could have helped Jill, her reaction to feeling threatened caused her to entirely deny the value of the ideas that Steve was offering her. In Jill's case, in order to make the threat go away, she avoided Steve's communications in every form. Because Jill felt she was being talked down to, she felt disrespected and disempowered, like she did as a child. By reacting to these stimuli in her internal or conceptual world, she missed the opportunity to work with a firm that would have provided greatly needed help to her and which likely would have significantly and positively impacted her company's bottom line, and improved her own standing within her company.

Had she been better able at the time, as she is now, to recognize her own, idiosyncratic warning signs of feeling threatened – wanting to escape, flushing and perspiring, becoming increasingly passive and silent – she could have chosen another way of handling Steve and not thrown out the advice along with the attitude.

There are many important lessons here for Steve, too. If he had taken the time to learn about Jill's background and management style from the people she had worked with, he might have presented his ideas more consultatively and not so authoritatively. And, Steve should have been taking mental notes throughout his meeting with Jill in order to assess, on an ongoing basis, how she was reacting to him. If Steve had paid more attention to how he delivered his presentation, he could have avoided setting off Jill's

threat alarm; and the resulting shutting down of all bi-lateral communication. Remember, the way something is wrapped or packaged, often determines whether or not your idea, strategy, proposal, or other communication gets positively received.

SNATCHING DEFEAT FROM THE JAWS OF VICTORY

With the kind of persistence and finesse that you would expect from a seasoned, top sales professional, David finally made it past the decision-influencers to the decision - maker, George Baxter, senior vice president, procurement, for World Wide Chips; a must have account that David's company and former sales manager had been trying to win over for years. Because of the long life cycle of the manufacturing equipment involved, World Wide Chips had been a lock for the competition, until now.

David had prepared well: he knew George's products, purchased several years ago from the current vendor as well as his own; he was well versed in the new technologies in the marketplace; he knew that his product was the best out there; he knew what terms he was authorized to offer; he knew what his best offer looked like from every angle, and finally, he knew the advantages his service department had to offer over the competition. During the sales presentation, David did an outstanding job demonstrating extensive research and knowledge into the seemingly endless service and network problems that World Wide Chips had been experiencing with its existing equipment and service vendor. David spent most of his presentation time providing hard facts and costs that were incurred by WWC because of the current vendor's product deficiencies and service related costs. There was no doubt that every thing David said was factually based, and his pitch required no fluffing. Only when David was certain that George truly understood, and more importantly, agreed, that the total solution that he was offering World Wide Chips was unbeatable, and better on an order of magnitude than the current vendor, did he stop criticizing the current vendor. After what appeared to David as a thoughtful and extended Q&A period, he concluded his presentation and thanked George for his time and the opportunity to sell and service his company's products to WWC. They agreed

that David should call the following Monday, at which time George would give David his decision. How do you think David made out?

The following Monday could not come soon enough for David, because he was giddy over the likelihood that World Wide Chips was finally going to be his company's customer. The commissions from this one account alone would double his income for the next three years. When David was finally able to get through to George Baxter, the SVP for procurement he did not get the answer he had been anticipating.

While David had indeed offered the best price, product and service, an unbeatable comprehensive sales solution, he did not win the account away from the incumbent vendor. But how could that be in light of the facts? Unbeknownst to David, George had agreed to meet with him because he was ready to switch vendors, and David's company had the equipment and service that he was looking to purchase on behalf of World Wide Chips. But David, relatively new to his current territory, did not know that George, the decision maker whom he was trying so hard to pitch, had been responsible several years earlier for the decision to purchase the products and services that David had been deriding throughout a good part of his presentation.

Despite being quietly polite as David rattled off all the things that were wrong with World Wide Chips' current vendor, along with a brief diatribe on why their decision to purchase from that vendor in the first place had been a poor one, George was not, as you might imagine, very happy to be listening to David's rant. In his effort to demonstrate his broad product and industry knowledge, David shot himself in the proverbial foot. The deal had been David's for the losing--and that is exactly what he did.

And so, as happens more frequently than most people realize, a decision was made based on factors that were not logical, **but psychological**. A potential buyer's attention was focused on how he was wrong, and in a tradition at least as old as ancient Rome, the messenger of bad tidings was not made to feel very welcome. In this case, David had

unintentionally made his potential customer, George, feel wrong, and George responded to his feelings by cutting off any further relationship between David and himself.

Once again, each party could have behaved differently. With more awareness from training or coaching, George Baxter at World Wide Chips could have talked himself out of his initial reaction of taking David's criticism too personally, and focused instead on the many benefits that the proposal offered his company. As to David, he should have stayed more present-centered and focused on the myriad benefits his company's solutions could have provided the customer, rather than pointing out what was wrong with the customer's existing products and services. If David had acquired more corporate intelligence before his meeting, he would've learned ahead of time that George, the person he was finally going to meet with, had in fact been responsible for the decision to purchase from the current vendor several years earlier. Sales training that includes realistic and assessable simulations, market intelligence and research, role-playing, and active coaching is particularly well-suited for identifying and preventing potential breakdowns such as this one.

CRITICISM & NEGATIVITY WILL ALMOST ALWAYS MAKE OTHERS FEEL WRONG & TRIGGER THEIR THREAT ALARMS

From our consulting experiences we have chosen two very different examples of how criticism and negativity can make others feel wrong, or threatened. And one of these examples also illuminates the fact that even people who are otherwise good managers, can trigger the threat alarms of their subordinates.

Let's look at the example of how negativity and criticism triggers our threat alarms through the use of Charley's behavior. Charley was the CEO of a global manufacturing company. He was brought in from the outside, with the objective of taking a long established and profitable \$2 billion company to \$5 billion in five years. While he took over a solid company, with industry competitive growth, the company had bloated expenses, archaic computer reporting systems, ad hoc purchasing, and many other fixable

problems. Its stock price wasn't moving beyond its historical high, despite the company being number one or two in all its major markets.

Charley inherited a lineup of senior executives who had been around for decades, with more than several who built their own fiefdoms and have protected each others' backs for many years. Several were highly respected company-wide for their work and their people skills; just as many others were not respected at all outside of their own department. The intelligence on Charley was that he had a reputation as a tough, no nonsense, numbers guy; who understood global manufacturing, the global markets and could therefore dramatically increase the company's revenues through a combination of an aggressive acquisition strategy and organic growth in the company's foreign, emerging markets. What he didn't bring was any institutional knowledge of the company, experience in the industry, and especially, any understanding of the internal politics and corporate culture. And, he certainly had no idea about the merits and weaknesses of the key executives that formed his senior management ranks. He made his own decisions about people after brief, sometimes cursory meetings, at which little about the executive or managers could clearly be gleaned. And, as you will see here, his people skills and emotional IQ were quite underdeveloped.

Almost immediately after his tenure began, Charley started criticizing processes and blaming people—at all levels. We were engaged by Charley's company on a very complex acquisition at the time, and working with people there that we had more than a decade of experience collaborating with—long before Charley came along. At one meeting, that took place in the company's plush conference room, Charley, the CEO called together about twenty managers, directors, vice presidents, senior vice presidents, and the CFO. Charley's agenda for the meeting was the pricing and valuation strategy for the deal on which we were advising his senior management. At the meeting Charley raised several important questions relating to the target's financials, which we had gleaned through an arduous and intensive due diligence process. He called upon a young manager in his early thirties, who had a stellar reputation in the company for his financial acumen, his integrity, and his ability to get along with others. His name was Dan, and, he

had worked in several financial positions with the company, before moving into the corporate development group, which helped him understand many financial perspectives relating to deals and how they impact the company. We had worked with Dan for a couple of years, and were generally very impressed by his knowledge and ability to research data and report back to his bosses in a highly cogent fashion. Dan listened intently to the questions being asked, and started answering them, point by point. But before he could complete his first answer, Charley interrupted him, and told him he was wrong—before he even heard the complete answer! Dan, for a moment, was like a deer in the headlights. He took a breath, every set of eyes in the room on him, glad that they weren't themselves in Charley's cross hairs, and he began to provide incontrovertible facts in support of the answer that he had tried to give a few moments earlier. Again, Charley stopped him mid-sentence and said that this time, Dan was being evasive and not providing the information that he had requested. Dan, usually an easy-going guy, was clearly stressed by now, and looking for a way to provide the facts that would answer his CEO's questions without provoking another criticism or negative comment. As he began again, Charley jumped on him. There was no reason, no act on Dan's part that we or anyone could attribute to Charley's belligerence and meanness.

But this time, watching a highly motivated and valuable employee being wrongly and harshly criticized by Charley, I interrupted the tirade being launched at Dan, stood up, and told the CEO that we believed that Dan was right on point. Dan, relieved that someone else was now taking fire, sat down. I looked at my notes when necessary, and provided the same facts, uninterrupted by Charley, and seemed to deflect the CEO's attention away from his manager and on to a new line of questions. I sat down—and didn't at that moment get fired—as many in the room later told us they thought was what was going to happen. Charley did indeed have another question, and again, he asked Dan for the answer. And again, Dan checked his notes and began to offer an insightful and fact based answer. And as if the previous exchange and criticisms had never happened, Charley launched into Dan again, and again, for no apparent reason to anyone. Before I could jeopardize our firm's future engagement activity by going head to head for a second time with the CEO, the chief financial officer stood up and took the fire. And,

like I had done minutes earlier, he provided the same answers that Dan had been providing, and the CEO kept quiet. Dan looked like he had played football without a helmet by this point.

You can probably guess what kind of consequences followed this meeting.

The meeting over, the twenty or so attendees went their separate ways back to their offices and to their various operating or administrative groups. By the time we got to a favorite after-work watering hole, we met employees at various levels who, while not even having attended the meeting, were talking about the excessive and totally unnecessary criticism that had been relentlessly sent Dan's way by the CEO. The effect was chilling on the people who attended, and it created fear of the new CEO and loathing for his treatment of a well known, well liked, and respected manager.

As we were engaged by the firm for a couple of years subsequent to the event, we saw first hand how Charley's criticism and negativity had demoralized most of the headquarters staff, at every level. Most managers who would have in the past coveted the opportunity to meet with the CEO tried to avoid attending those meetings in every possible way. And those, like Dan, who knew first hand what could happen in those meetings, but had no way to avoid them, started to learn that it was better to defer to higher-ups at the meeting to support their answers, than to offer any answers of their own.

Charley's staff became more and more skilled at reading Charley – and figuring out how to give him what he wanted in order to avoid criticism. Rather than bringing him new ideas, or taking initiative, Charley's insensitive interpersonal style created a team of men and women who learned to take no risks, to duck and cover, and to offer very little of themselves. We saw morale, innovation and productivity all suffer for years after that single event—as Charley's senior executives and their staffs either felt threatened or

angry; and were therefore unwilling to take any risks or put in the extra effort that sometimes makes the difference between success and failure.

The big lessons here, of course, are for those who can get away with bullying and threatening, by virtue of having the power and position. Keep in mind, however, this kind of leadership stifles productivity, lowers morale, and encourages good people to leave because it banishes innovation and critical thinking. Charley was an imperial CEO who valued blind loyalty over any other quality in his executives and employees. Fortunately, his reign ended—albeit a couple of years later than it should have. But the damage done over the five years he was there was incalculable. Fortunately for the company, great jobs were getting scarce in the area, so many good people that might have left stayed on, despite the culture of criticism, bullying and negativity that Charley had spawned.

Even Self-Criticism Can Set Off Others' Threat Alarms

Here another example illustrates how easy it can be to inadvertently and unintentionally set off another's threat alarm. We encountered this experience while sitting in on a meeting with James, a vice president of a medium sized financial services firm and his staff. We had been brought in at the request of the company's HR vice president because James had particularly high turnover in his department, even though he was doing a good job, and was generally considered a very competent and easy to deal with boss. And, we learned that pay and benefits for his people equaled or surpassed the average for his company's industry. So what was going wrong that was causing expensive and disruptive turnover in his department?

As the meeting began with pleasantries and small talk and some laughs all around about water cooler talk and the company's current and projected share price, everyone appeared relaxed and ready to get started. James cordially welcomed everyone and said a few kind words about the work that several of the attendees had produced earlier in the week. James certainly seemed like a good boss to work for. About half an hour into the

meeting, one of the staff, Barbara, who we had met previously, and whom we were very impressed with, created the first glint of what the problem was with her boss. As Barbara had worked to produce an updated version of a previously produced analysis for James, she found, buried deep in one of the financial reports, in a section that James had actually contributed himself, a relatively insignificant error in the numbers due to a poorly interpreted accounting rule. No one had caught this before the report was submitted to senior management, and James himself gave the document his seal of approval. That being the case, the numbers were integrated into a summary report for the board of directors, which had already met, utilized the document to make some minor spending decisions and those decisions were already implemented.

At first, James calmly asked Barbara how she arrived at her results. Prepared for the query, she showed her spread sheet to James, and gave another copy to the group's financial wizard. When James realized he had given wrong data to the board, he started, slowly at first, cursing himself. When he looked at Greg, the financial wizard and received corroboration that the information he approved, and which he was responsible for, was in fact incorrect, James started cursing himself out in a full blown rage. He became the most self-loathing and self deprecating manager any of us had ever seen! He kept asking himself aloud how he could do such a stupid thing. He decided that upon telling senior management about the mistake, he would be fired, despite being with the company for ten years, and being one of the most valuable vice presidents. Everyone in the room tried to look at something or someone else...on anything or anyone but James. By a few minutes into his self critical meltdown, the mood in the room was tense, nervous and most attendees simply looked helpless, as James just kept going and going on about how he screwed up! He even apologized to the group for making them look bad.

Several minutes later, still berating himself, James was finally running out of steam. Now he was morose. When Greg pointed out that the mistake would not materially affect any of the decisions the board made and that senior management implemented, it didn't seem to help, in fact, James was now ready for another round of lambasting himself.

Another self-directed tirade later, a red faced James, finally asked for some more comments on the work that the group had in front of them. Questions were asked and readily answered within the group, and the meeting adjourned.

If you were working for James, what reactions would you likely have had?

As the meeting split into smaller groups and everyone went back to their offices, the only thing they were talking about was James's self-criticism over a not-so-serious matter. The talk, of course, then turned to concern over what might happen if one of them made a similar or even worse mistake in the future? All agreed that none of them wanted to be the one to take the same beating that James had given himself. And so, although James had been berating only himself, the staff felt threatened by James's severely administered thrashing in front of the entire group. As one staffer we debriefed afterwards told us, "there but for the grace of God goes I." Just like when someone feels wronged by another, and his or her threat alarm is triggered, James's criticism of himself, harsh as it was, created a perceived threat to all of the staff members present. After all, if the boss treats himself that way when he makes a mistake, what's he going to do to me?

We attended several more staff meetings over the course of several weeks, and in virtually all of them, James managed to find issues on which to take himself to task. We interviewed each staff member, and the majority of the senior staff confided in us that while they loved the work, and liked James, they wanted to go to another area of the company where they could work for someone who was less critical of themselves and where the constant thought of making a mistake, and by consequence, seeing that self criticism changing very quickly into a rant of denigrating behavior toward the subordinate was much less likely to occur.

A Poorly Written E-mail Can Spell Relationship Disaster

E-mail may save time and postage, and provide for 24/7 instant connectivity between you and your colleagues, bosses, vendors, customers and friends and family, but this

near- instant process, has a significant downside. Unless you're writing to someone that you know very well, and you each have a well established understanding of the other's writing style, a hastily written or poorly worded e-mail can be easily misconstrued by its recipient, and can lead to a fractured or broken relationship.

The fact is, most people consider e-mail something less than a formal letter, and many senders have taken to abbreviating words, and even whole sentences, forgetting about syntax, leaving out the salutation, and believe that brevity is the key to using e-mail efficiently. Some of that may be okay when writing to good friends and family, but it's definitely not okay when using e-mail for business. Even your closing, be it sincerely, regards, best regards or nothing at all, can unintentionally send a signal to the recipient that you don't really care about him or her, or it may be interpreted as disrespectful. In fact, there are so many ways that *a well intentioned e-mail* can be wrongly interpreted, thereby setting off the recipient's threat alarm, that a poorly or hastily written e-mail can cause significant damage; and the sender will probably never learn that it was a wrongly perceived threat, brought about by the sender's well intentioned e-mail, that caused the deal or the relationship to enter troubled waters or come apart.

E-mails are also used extensively to save time by not being on the phone, but there are many times when a phone call is going to be more productive, more appreciated, and more appropriate. And, if you don't really know how the person you're communicating with is feeling about your query or response to his or her question, sending a response or asking a question by e-mail can really set things back. When in doubt, we recommend you go face to face or at least make a phone call. In an e-mail, the lack of intonation available from a voiceless reply or sent message can allow for all kinds of ambiguity—and increases the risk of misinterpretation, threat, and its unfortunate consequences. Another possible e-mail threat alarm trigger comes from the fact that e-mail is sometimes delayed for 10 minutes, 15 minutes or even longer. And even if the two people sending e-mails back and forth know each other well, a long delay, when expectations are for immediate feedback, can also cause an unintentional slight, and cause one or the others' threat alarm to be triggered.

Another downside of e-mail's immediacy and availability, is that when you're upset about something that the intended recipient may have said, done or e-mailed, sending an immediate reply, without thinking about the consequences of your words and tone, and how the recipient is likely to interpret your message can be devastating. When feelings go up, thinking goes down, so it is never a good idea to write an e-mail to someone when you're angry or upset, even if the current recipient is not the person that upset you.

And if a relationship you've been cultivating, and let's move beyond business here for just a moment, and say any relationship you've been in—whether it's been a productive business relationship that's ending because a competitor offered a better deal to your customer, or you didn't get the job you'd been working on for weeks or months, or perhaps you just broke up with your boyfriend or girlfriend -- have the courage, the class and the discipline to either call that person up, or better yet, send a real letter, we still have a postal system you know, and say thanks for whatever did exist between you, or for considering you for the job, or for the happiness the relationship brought you while you were together. How you leave a relationship, whether business or personal, can be just as important as how you started it. Because you never know what the future may bring from that final act of courtesy and your well-intentioned goodbye.

Threat Level Red Summary & Review

These stories have been drawn from our real life consulting and coaching engagements. They are just a few of the countless examples that illustrate the importance of being aware of ourselves and the threat triggers we all possess, and how easily many of these triggers can be activated. Sometimes the result of feeling threatened is temporary, but often relationships become problematic and in the worst cases, irreparable. When we fail to build or maintain successful business relationships, we are not just hurting ourselves; our companies are also negatively impacted by how we interact with others. Sales revenues are lost, customer attrition rates rise, productivity suffers, corporate cultures are polluted, retention of great people goes down, creativity is stifled, and leadership

becomes just a word instead of a set of actions. In the five examples cited above, all of the parties lost significant time, productivity and or money due to their own sense of feeling wrong or by inadvertently causing another person's threat alarm to be activated.

In the first example, Susan's management style caused Josh's creativity and work output to plunge during a critical phase of product development within the company; and culture clashes flared within the department for many months, until Jill spent both time and money to have them addressed by outside experts.

In the second scenario, Jill's perception that Steve seemed to imply he knew better than she did how to do her job as SVP of operations caused her to forgo her relationship with Steve, and with it, his firm's strategies and action plans that could have saved her operating group millions of dollars; which would have created a significant improvement to earnings, along with enhanced shareholder value. Moreover, Jill forfeited working with a firm that could have brought sustainable improvements to her group -- which in turn could have helped Jill's own star to rise within her company. Steve, the management consultant who, by inadvertently setting off Jill's threat alarm, lost the opportunity to have his firm engaged by Jill -- which meant immediate loss to his firm of many hundreds of thousands of dollars in unrealized revenues, along with the opportunity to build a long-term relationship with a large, global company, and with it, the potential for many future assignments and ongoing revenues.

In the third case, David had a virtual lock on the deal when he met George Baxter, the SVP for procurement, to pitch his company's products and services. Instead he walked away without an agreement, and his company lost millions in sales revenue that was literally his for the asking -- because David's presentation was loaded with criticism. Instead of staying focused on the benefits his products and services could offer, he spent much of his time criticizing the former decision of the decision maker. Feeling David and his firm were judging him as wrong for his purchasing decision several years earlier, George opted to buy from one of David's competitors, even though the deal offered by David's company was better in every way. This decision by the procurement officer to

acquire an inferior set of products and services, and which committed his company to spend significantly more money for both the initial capital outlay and ongoing service, should be a vivid reminder to us all of just how important the need to be right is within most of us.

In the fourth example, which involved Charley, the criticizing and belligerent CEO, we learned how insensitive and abusive questioning of subordinates can lead to a decrease in morale, productivity and growth throughout the organization. Charley's impatient and critical manner of eliciting responses from Dan set off the threat alarms of everyone in that meeting. And it didn't take long for most of the headquarters' staff to recognize that they had a bullying, imperial CEO on their hands. Managers and executives who criticize cause significant damage in their organizations. And while it may not be obvious to the casual observer, the fear, distrust and damage to the corporate culture take their toll on the company in very subtle, but measurable ways. There is even a growing body of research that indicates that incivility in the workplace has deleterious effects on employees' health and mental health, further impeding a company's bottom line success by increased absenteeism, insurance premiums and disability claims.

In the final scenario, we learned that even though James's highly critical behavior was aimed only at himself, his staff was certain that if that's the way their boss verbally abused himself, and over minor mistakes at that, he would likely respond with equal or even greater displeasure to any one of them, if they made a significant error or provided a report that didn't meet with their boss' approval. It's not so startling, though there was no threat directed from James to his staff, everyone knows that someone who is so quick to find fault is a fault-finder, and it is just a matter of time until he finds fault with you... Although a well liked and respected manager, James was losing his staff because of his self-criticism and lack of self control. The lesson here is that James was unaware that by being so critical of himself, he was activating the threat alarms of his entire staff on an ongoing basis. With a fair amount of coaching, James would come to realize the impact his perfectionism and fault finding were having on his staff. And as James became easier on himself, turnover in his group practically ceased, his people were more productive and

creative, risk takers emerged and were emboldened, and the information that James's group provided to senior management became even more highly regarded than in the past. No longer constantly setting off the threat alarms of his staff, James's own mood became lighter, and his work effort more focused and more productive and effective.

AVOIDING HIDDEN BUSINESS RELATIONSHIP DISASTERS

At some time, we have all seen people around us directly and pointedly tell someone else that he or she was blatantly wrong, thus eliciting biologically based survival alarms and all that follows: conflict and reduced efficiency, productivity, and motivation. And since all it takes is a negative affective event or a disempowering event to create a *perceived threat* to get this whole competency-deteriorating process started, and being made to feel wrong is almost always perceived as a threat, it doesn't take much more than a careless word, or tone of voice, or a bad attitude to begin undermining the job satisfaction and competencies of those around us.

So, how do we address this biologically based set of circumstances? How do we avoid getting to Threat Level Red within our work related relationships? We can do so by expanding our awareness and learning from examples around us all the time, like the ones we've presented here. By using the same cognitive processes that have enabled our species to move beyond our biological limitations in other ways, such as living in inhospitable climates, fighting diseases, and getting to the moon, we can self-monitor and self-regulate and use our higher order functioning to counteract our primitive fight-flight reactions and choose our responses responsibly. We can tip the feeling/ thinking see-saw in the direction of intent, integrity and mutual respect in the workplace. We can also do more to prevent reaching Threat Level Red by understanding cause and effect, and thinking things through before we speak and act. Additionally, we can learn more about our own threat alarms as a means to better understanding ourselves, and as a first step towards understanding the people we come into contact with in our business lives and relationships every day

Remember that just because someone doesn't see something the same way you do, that doesn't mean they're wrong -- even if you're sure you're right. Like the blind men facing the elephant, what you come to know about something is always determined by where you stand; and since where you stand on any issue is determined by your life's history-- your age, your gender, your family and cultural background; past relationships, all your experiences – we're always going to see things differently from each other. So, the only way for us to understand more fully and accurately what the elephant or any issue is really about is to talk with each other, and find out what the other person sees from his or her point of view. Try to see differing perspectives as an opportunity to learn something new.

The fact is, there aren't many saber tooth tigers around anymore, and most of the threats we feel aren't physical ones. So, until our biological evolution catches up to our societal and technological development, if we want to optimize our relationships we have to learn to override our automatic responses and intentionally choose our reactions. By changing our minds and our self-talk we can transform a threat into a challenge and we can lead, teach, and motivate those around us to do the same.

Top 10 Threat Level Red Training Points To Remember

- 1. Our biology has us hardwired to react immediately to anything we perceive as threatening.*
- 2. Being made to feel wrong is almost always perceived as a threat.*
- 3. Whether the threat is from the outside world or in our minds, the fight -- flight reaction gets us ready for physical combat, but doesn't get us ready to function effectively at the office or within the context of our personal relationships.*
- 4. Our psychological defenses, while reducing our anxiety, cause us to distort important data, misinterpret others' communications, and therefore greatly impair our ability to make sound decisions.*
- 5. You can not hit warp speed if you are putting too much energy into your deflector shields.*

6. *Time and effort invested at the beginning saves a lot of cleanup later.*
7. *The way something is wrapped often determines how it is received.*
8. *Stay present centered.*
9. *Monitor all of your communications to reduce the risk of inadvertently threatening others.*
10. *Pay attention and act with intent.*

About the Authors

Martin D. Cohen, PhD is a licensed, clinical psychologist and is Maverick's Director of Behavioral Integration Management.TM Marty has three decades of coaching, leadership training and conflict resolution experience. Additionally, his directorate supports cultural assessment, sales associate and sales management assessment and training, and works collaboratively with the operations directorate on people issues relating to operational and organizational change and acquisitions.

William R. Stark is Maverick's Managing Partner. His practice area includes over two decades of hands-on acquisition, operating and strategy experience, with a specialty in due diligence, post-closing integration planning and leadership. Additionally, Bill had the lead role in designing Maverick's ground breaking sales assessment, training, and management program called X-CASE.

About the Firm

Maverick LLC is a global management consulting firm, based in Tampa, FL. The Firm has uniquely integrated the management and the behavioral sciences. Our innovative, collaboratively designed business strategies and action plans are more effectively implemented because we assess and address the people issues inherent to each client engagement. For more information and to contact us, please visit us on the web at maverickllc.com or call Bill Stark directly, at 813-258-6450. You may also download this content in document form and as a pod-cast from our website. This CD is available to organizations at a discount for quantity purchases. www.maverickllc.com