

# Are Your Taillights Flashing?

## Discovering the Shadow of Each HBDI® Quadrant

Duane Trammell, M.Ed.

On one of the numerous hospital stays my Mom has had this year I enjoyed a brief moment of levity. There were two elderly ladies visiting an elderly gentleman in the room next door to my Mom's. They both had been elementary school teachers in their earlier professional life and they both possessed what they called "auditorium voices." With their talent for speaking at decibel ten, coupled with their concern to speak loudly enough so that their gentlemen friend could hear them, I was privileged to hear every word of every conversation that was going on.

While these elderly ladies were visiting, another male patient happened to have walked down the hall with his IV pole, wearing one of those infamous hospital gowns. As he walked past our rooms, his gown

was gaping open in the back, exposing his entire backside for the world to see. The two ladies started cackling and said, "Someone needs to tell him that his taillights are flashing!" I couldn't help but chuckle; I had never heard that expression before and their Texas country drawl made the comment even funnier. But after that, I began to think about,

"I wonder how many times a part of me that shouldn't be seen publicly was wide open for all to see and wasn't very pretty? Have my taillights been flashing without me realizing it?"

In the first study of HBDI®, we focus on the unique talents/competencies



we each have in the four quadrants. Our strong quadrants are the source of our best contributions, our best thinking, and our best over-all work. But there are also some negative qualities that can emerge from each

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quadrant...qualities of thinking that are not productive and that would be better off never seen. We call these negative qualities “shadows.”

In a more serious context, the psychologist Carl Jung wrote much about “the shadow” side of our personalities. He taught us that the shadow is made up of “dark” parts of our personality we do not want to talk about and we do not want to face.

There is a shadow in everyone and it may take another person’s actions to realize the shadow within them and within ourselves.



Several years ago, Ann and I were working with some very talented executives who were struggling to team with one another. They were outstanding in their fields; they were good people; for the most part, they liked one another as colleagues. But we were called in because frankly, they were getting on each other’s nerves. Ann did what she is enormously gifted at...interviewing each of them and finding out where they were challenged, what their strengths were, and where they were struggling with colleagues. She brought this information back for us to study and see what insights we could gain. As we were discussing both the individuals and how the team interacted with one another...it became very clear to us: the highest competencies and strengths each individual possessed, when overplayed or used too much, became a weakness or source of dissention with team members. And we could sense that each person was, in effect, trying too hard to help by overplaying their strengths until they became too much of a good thing. Dominant personalities became overbearing.

Quiet introverts withdrew even more, pondering possible solutions. Each had the intent of helping,

but under pressure, each was exaggerating a strength into a liability for them and for the team.

In our earliest work on creativity and giftedness, Ann used an expression that stuck with most of our Clients for years... “Your bad habits are just your gifts that you are wearing wrong-side-out!” (For example, if you got in trouble as a kid for talking in school, perhaps you have a gift for speaking and might enjoy presenting or consulting.) Since that time, many others have built upon this idea and it has been developed into an entire approach. The Lominger Card decks have executive competencies on one side and show how the same competency reveals itself as a weakness if used too much. (I wish we would have thought of making those cards twenty five years ago...ours would have had cartoons on them and we might be rich today!) The point? We want to work out of our strengths as much as we can, but

it is very important for us to become aware when we cross the line and our strengths become a weakness to our performance.

“Your bad habits are just your gifts that you are wearing wrong-side-out!”

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Ann uses an example when we teach this concept that is very clear to see. She relates that one of her greatest strengths is verbal ability...she enjoys speaking, lecturing, and has a lot of knowledge in our field. She goes on to say that this strength becomes a liability if she is unaware others need to talk, add to the conversation, need to ask questions and she forgets to stop talking. For me, one of my greatest strengths is planning. My strength can go into a weakness if I over plan and want to stick to the plan, even if the plan is not working. What we discovered, is that you can take any strength and turn it into a weakness or liability. On the other hand, we also had some fun playing the game the other way. Most weaknesses and liabilities can be turned into strengths, if you consider the gifts and competencies hiding behind them, but that is for another article.

Our challenge is to identify our strengths and see what might be lurking behind them. In the recent years we have been using the HBDI®, we are discovering that one way to examine strengths overplayed into liabilities is to look at the HBDI® quadrants. The Herrmann Institute is also studying “Shadow Traits” and how these might emerge from each quadrant. As we have studied the quadrants and coached many executives through the years, these are some of the shadows we see lurking behind each of the quadrants:

As servant-leaders, one of the most important skill sets is self-awareness. In *The Case for Servant Leadership*, Kent Keith reminds us that the first

<p style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold; color: #000080; margin: 0;">A</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative</li> <li>• Mechanical</li> <li>• Critical of everything and everyone</li> <li>• Focused on why things won't work rather than how they can work.</li> <li>• Can be seen as cold, heartless.</li> <li>• Seen as “glass half-empty”</li> </ul>	<p style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold; color: #FFA500; margin: 0;">D</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Doesn't finish things</li> <li>• Impatient</li> <li>• Discounting of history, experience</li> <li>• Shoot first, aim later</li> <li>• Impetuous</li> </ul>
<p style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold; color: #008000; margin: 0;">B</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anal</li> <li>• Inflexible</li> <li>• Too-detailed</li> <li>• Don't like surprises. Resists fast change</li> <li>• Does not trust and rejects intuitive leaps. Relies only on proven traditional practices.</li> </ul>	<p style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold; color: #FF0000; margin: 0;">C</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overly sentimental</li> <li>• Emotions out of control</li> <li>• Talk a lot. Get into details of stories and wears others out.</li> <li>• Teacherly. Can impose teaching on others when they would prefer to discover answers on their own</li> </ul>

key practice of servant leadership is self awareness. He writes,

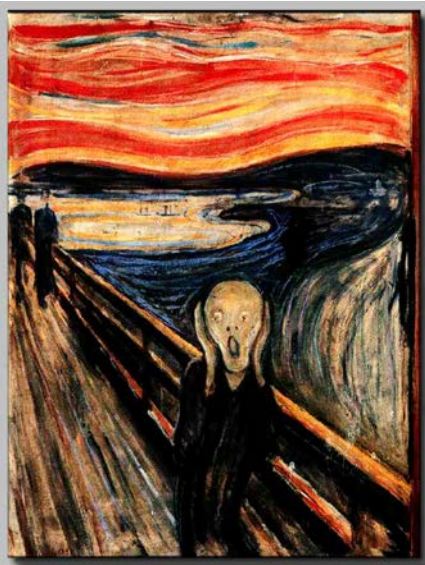
“Servant-leaders are aware of their strengths and their weaknesses. They know that they are not perfect, and yet they can perform at a high level; they know they have their own emotions and biases, and yet they can make wise and fair decisions. By building on their strengths

and accepting their weaknesses, they are ready to build on the strength and accept the weaknesses of others. They are less likely to judge, and more likely to encourage.”



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But beware! Robert K. Greenleaf warns us that at times this will not be a peaceful undertaking. “Awareness is not a giver of solace. Able leaders are keenly aware and reasonably disturbed.” Servant-leaders are not satisfied until they confront their own shadows and the shadows lurking in their organizations. It just may not be an easy and comfortable journey. We need to know when our taillights are flashing.



How do we practically put this to work in our lives to become better servant-leaders? We need not be afraid of finding our shadows and working from our strengths as much of the time as possible. The first step is to listen and watch ourselves as we interact with others. By simply being aware that we can become inflexible, or too emotional, criticize ideas too quickly, or act too quickly, we have a much better chance of slowing down and reversing the behaviors.

A second step that we have used successfully with our Clients is to coach one another with a quick signal when we are getting into our shadow side.

This is challenging, but if done in a non-judgmental spirit...even adding a little humor or playfulness to it, the message is often received in the right way. The goal is to stay on the positive side of the HBDI® strength, and not wander into shadow territory.

Servant leadership is a challenging, but rewarding journey. Modern tools like the HBDI® can help us work out of our strengths. And with some courage, inspiration from Robert Greenleaf, and as the Beatles song lyrics say “With a Little Help from Our Friends” we can learn to own and balance our shadows.

“Taking it in its deepest sense, the shadow is the invisible saurian tail that [we] still drag behind [us]. Carefully amputated, it becomes the healing serpent of the mysteries. Only monkeys parade with it.”

Carl Jung, *The Integration of the Personality*. (1939)

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