

## Tame Your Leadership Critic, a.k.a., Saboteurs (or inner Minions)

**Leadership Saboteurs:** These are reactive, triggered parts of you. In leadership contexts, they often push you into or resist change, including organizational change, shifts in team dynamics, composition or responsibility, or growth opportunities for you in your capacity as a leader. When Saboteurs bully you into action, outcomes are often hard to sustain, of compromised quality, or inspire ambivalence or negativity. By contrast, resistant Saboteurs maintain the *status quo* by railing against shifts they believe are dangerous or threatening, including those you, your team, or organization believe are worthwhile. Saboteurs are also “comparison machines;” they judge you based on how well or poorly you do in relation to other leaders within or outside your organization. They appear auditorily, behaviorally, or emotionally, including sometimes in ways visible to others, and sometimes in ways only apparent to you. Here are their most common practices:

- 1) Self-directed insults, name-calling, other forms of negative self-talk, as well as negative communication with others.
- 2) Internally and outer-directed critical, dismissive, sarcastic, agitated, or otherwise unpleasant tone(s) of voice, facial expressions, or posture(s).
- 3) Rigid cause-effect, either/or thinking (“if this then that”) and use of absolutes (always, never, impossible) in self-talk or communication with others: e.g., “I’ll never be a great leader!”
- 4) Internally or outer-directed commands, e.g., you or I should, shouldn’t, have to, or need to<sup>1</sup> in contrast to want to, choose to, or are advised to.
- 5) Persistent procrastination and time-management challenges.
- 6) Mild distraction.
- 7) Fogginess, lethargy, or sudden onset of fatigue.
- 8) Mild anxiety or temporary episodes of withdrawal.
- 9) Righteous or defensive anger.
- 10) Unhealthy habits.
- 11) Distancing, isolating, armoring, resistant, numbing behaviors.<sup>2</sup>

Saboteurs take many forms personally and professionally including *Judge, Victim, Pleaser, Restless, Hyper-Vigilant, Hyper-Achiever, Hyper-Rational, Controller, Avoider, Stickler*<sup>3</sup>—better known as a *Perfectionist—Procrastinator, Catastrophizer, Impostor, Rebel, Self-Righteous, Competitor, Know-It-All, and Peacekeeper*. Most of you have two or more Saboteurs, though one might be most prominent.

**Inner Leader:** By contrast, your Inner Leader (IL)—the competent, grounded, centered, wise part of you—is calm, discerning, curious, accountable, and growth-mindset oriented. Your IL expresses understanding and empathy for you and others, even when challenged.

**When & Why?** Most Saboteurs developed long ago, well before you became a leader, to protect you from real or imagined threats. They thrive in Fight, Flight, Freeze, or Fawn<sup>4</sup> mode. They are like internal toddlers, teens, or minions from that eponymous movie: They are devoted to you—the person who serves as their boss—and to your wellbeing, yet often unintentionally hurt you, damage your relationship with others, or limit your growth as a leader, all while ostensibly trying to protect and serve you. They are well-meaning, yet unskilled and ineffective defense mechanisms that in the long run deliver more harm than benefit.



**The Dilemma:** While your Internal Leader evolves and grows, Saboteurs stay static, especially if you remain unaware of them or let them make decisions, pursue opportunities, or lead your team. Sometimes Saboteurs talk to other people’s Saboteurs, which generates negative conflict. **NB:** Saboteurs can be the rock *and* hard place: “You deserve respect!” “Why would anyone respect you?!?”

**Good news:** You can shift the balance of power from Saboteurs to your Inner Leader. The better you know your Saboteurs, the more capably you can center your IL and limit Saboteur interference in your leadership goals and professional life (and personal life, too).

**What Now?** Get to know your Leadership Saboteurs. Which ones do you sense most often at work? What triggers them? What do they say or do, or refuse to say or do? If you could draw them, what would they look like? Because they’re often auto-pilot, familiar parts of you, please be patient as you get to know them and how they show up in your professional life and your leadership efforts, in particular.

**Protections:** Once you have a sense of your primary Leadership Saboteurs, including how and when they show up, ask them:

***What are you trying to protect me from? What risks, dangers, downsides, or challenges would I face as a leader if I did or said the opposite of what you want, or if I did or said the opposite of how you show up?***

Come up with at least two protections. Then, consider whether—at this stage in your life, in your career, and for that issue—you want those protections, even if only to a lesser degree. If so, what are more productive ways to protect yourself?

<sup>1</sup> While human needs exist—e.g., for air, water, safety—Saboteurs often disguise “shoulds” as needs: “You need to...;” “I need that report now!”

<sup>2</sup> Some of these challenges— e.g., lethargy, mild distraction, mild anxiety, episodes of withdrawal, numbing behaviors, unhealthy habits—differ in important ways from neurodivergence and health conditions—including mental health challenges—like sleep deprivation, narcolepsy, ADHD, dissociation, anxiety disorder, clinical depression, addictions, and self-harm. Plus, some concepts—like righteous anger—occur for more reasons than explained by a Saboteur. They can be important and empowering responses to discrimination, abuse, and other life experiences.

<sup>3</sup> The term “Saboteur” was coined by the Co-Active Training Institute. Shirzad Chamine enumerates the first ten Saboteurs in his book, *Positive Intelligence*.

<sup>4</sup> While fawning—a.k.a., people-pleasing or appeasing—is not among the brain’s commonly noted reactions to fear, some therapists add it to fight/flight/freeze as a trauma response. Cultural beliefs and discrimination reinforce “fawning” as a protective Saboteur response, especially for cis-gender women, people of color, and other minorities in North America, since appeasement can support professional success *and* impede leadership growth.